REACHING YOUR

MAXIMUM POTENTIAL

in Christ

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LIVING TRUTH
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Reaching Your Maximum Potential in Christ

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Seeing Potential

It was during my first year of coaching soccer that I met Michael. Tryouts had just begun and we coaches had gathered to evaluate the skills of the new kids being tested. We were looking for raw talent—someone we could work with—and then I spotted him. He was the heaviest and slowest kid on the field. None of the other coaches seemed interested, but I saw potential in him. I wanted to train Michael and turn him into a great player.

The next two years our team won the league and playoff championships. Michael played a crucial role, putting his training into practice. He shut down the other teams' offense. He used his great size to power kick the ball down the field, and in taking penalty and corner kicks. As a result, all the other coaches wanted him and encouraged their "big" players to imitate him.

Michael went on to excel in wrestling and football. He won the Pennsylvania high school PIAA state heavyweight wrestling title in his senior year, and received a full scholarship to the University of Buffalo where he became a well respected standout in football. He also ranked nationally in wrestling while maintaining Dean's List academic standards.

Michael now has a successful career in Pittsburgh, is married to a wonderful woman and has three beautiful daughters (all of whom have taken the challenge of the Obstacle Course at our ministry center). Michael and his mom attribute much of his success in sports and in life to inspiration from my early encouragement when the other coaches saw no potential.

Jesus Christ viewed His disciples in this way. The growth of His Church did not depend solely on that group of ordinary people. Its development was assured by the power of His Spirit and His sovereign design. Jesus chose to begin His work with weak, sinful

people who later dramatically altered the course of world history and set in motion the Gospel being taken to the ends of the earth. Jesus sees potential in each of us! Through the power of His Word and Spirit, He continually works in us, fulfilling His purpose as we yield our lives to Him and live by the principles of Scripture.

A Zero?

Some of you may feel that your life equals a Big Zero and that "0" is meaningless. I asked several people what a zero meant. "Nothing" they replied. So I said, "Since '0' means nothing, write me a check for $1.00 and let me add a few zeroes!" They got the message: Even though *we* may think we have no real value or potential, this could not be further from the truth! When a person is infused with God's Spirit, he or she has unlimited potential to fulfill the purpose the Lord has for their lives. We have great value because *God* values us.

The Challenge

Bill Rudge Ministries' purpose is to challenge youth and adults to reach their maximum potential—physically, mentally, emotionally and above all, spiritually. You will discover in this book some of the dynamic biblical principles that have transformed my life and molded this ministry. Jesus Christ can take an ordinary person and use him or her in an extraordinary way. That is what He did with me, and with thousands of others who have accepted the challenge. As you apply these biblical truths, you too, will begin to reach your maximum potential in Christ!

The Quest: Examine the Evidence

With so many religious and philosophical options from which to choose, why are you a Christian? Is it because you are convinced that Jesus Christ is who He claims to be, and that the Bible is the unique revelation of God?

First Peter 3:15 encourages us:

> But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer [make a defense] to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.

I shared my faith in Christ with a young man to whom I was giving a ride. He said, "Bill, don't waste your time. I don't believe in Jesus Christ, and I don't believe in the Bible." I responded, "That's fine, Dan. You have a right to believe whatever you want, but don't be so foolish as to reject the Bible and Jesus Christ without first examining the overwhelming evidence."

We went on to discuss some of the archaeological discoveries that have established the historical accuracy of innumerable biblical details, the support of scientific evidence and the accuracy and superiority of biblical health and nutrition principles. I shared some of the messianic prophecies in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) that had been given hundreds of years before Jesus Christ was incarnated on earth, explaining the mathematical impossibility for anyone to fulfill even a few of these prophecies; yet these were fulfilled in exact detail by only one person in history—and that person is Jesus of Nazareth. I explained to him why the evidence of the resurrection is undeniable and asking what other religious

leader has an empty tomb? (See my book *Who Is This Jesus?* for more on these topics.)

I asked Dan to consider the numerous biblical prophecies written almost 2,000 years ago concerning the end times: prophecies foretelling a one-world government, a one-world monetary system and a one-world religion. The details and specifics of these and many other prophecies (being fulfilled today, right before our eyes) would have been impossible to foretell without divine inspiration. Finally, I shared the reality of Jesus Christ through the undeniable ways in which He has transformed my life, and millions of others throughout history, as well as the miraculous interventions the Lord has performed in my personal life and ministry. These examples and more demonstrate why I gave my life to Christ.

Three Questions

I did not choose to believe in Jesus Christ and become a Christian by random chance. There was, in fact, an initial bias and a deliberate rejection of Him due, in part, to my lifestyle choices, ulterior motives, and an inability to resolve my conflict with a loving God and the suffering and death I witnessed around me. Nevertheless, lasting fulfillment eluded me despite all my searching proving insufficient or leading to dead ends. And in the end, my restless heart, coupled with a relentless quest for truth and purpose, forced me to consider honestly three crucial questions:

1. *Is there a God?* If there is not, then I can live any way I want. However, my search and research had convinced me there is a Creator.
2. If there is a God, *are there many ways or only one way to this Supernatural Being?* After examining the evidence, I became convinced there is only one way to God—through Jesus Christ.
3. *How do I come to know God and what does He require of me?* My spiritual journey proved fruitful: I could not deny the truth. At age 18 I became an ardent believer in, and follower

of, Jesus Christ as my Savior and Lord. God's Spirit began to transform my life as I spent time in Scripture, prayer and fasting, and started living by the biblical principles I will be sharing throughout this book.

I have grown in my faith over the years: Continuing investigation and research confirm the wisdom of having committed my life to Jesus Christ. There is only One before Whom I willingly bend my knee and bow down. To Him alone do I entrust my life, my future and my eternal destiny!

Destinies: Stephen and Billy

Stephen, an agnostic, was a brilliant physicist—but the detailed prophecies of Scripture and the glorious revelation of Jesus Christ far surpass even the highest level of human knowledge or ability. The psalmist stated, "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God'" (Psalm 14:1; 53:1). Conscience and the creation point with definitive clarity to a magnificent Creator! "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of His hands" (Psalm 19:1).

God declared through the prophet Isaiah, "Before Me there was no God formed, and there will be none after Me" (Isaiah 43:10 NASB). Moses wrote, "There is no god besides Me. I put to death and I bring to life...and no one can deliver out of My hand" (Deuteronomy 32:39).

In stark contrast to Stephen, Billy committed his life to Jesus Christ and sought to live a life that honored Him. If Stephen was right about God, then he and Billy have lost nothing. However, if Billy was right, then he has won everything and Stephen has lost everything. In other words, Stephen had nothing to gain and everything to lose. Billy had nothing to lose and everything to gain.

The Apostle Paul makes it clear that when we stand before God we will have no defense for rejecting Him. He states in Romans 1:20, "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—His eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being

understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse." Jeremiah the prophet wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, "You will seek Me and find Me when you seek Me with all your heart" (Jeremiah 29:13). God will move heaven and earth to make known His way of salvation to anyone who seeks Him with a sincere and humble heart. Each of us has both the freedom and opportunity in this life to determine our eternal destiny.

"Now this is eternal life: that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom You have sent" (John 17:3). "And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life" (1 John 5:11-12).

Instead of discounting the Creator and replacing Him with vain philosophies that ultimately lead to futility, you can come to know the Creator in a real and personal way. Once you do, you can look at our amazing Creator's creation through eyes of wonder, gratitude, hope and assurance.

> You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for You created all things, and by Your will they were created and have their being (Revelation 4:11).
>
> Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen (1 Timothy 1:17).

Last Chance

Lynne called the ministry to see if I could visit her ex-husband, Terry (father to their son and daughter) who was in the hospital. He was an atheist and dying of cancer. Entering Terry's hospital room, I saw a man who was mere skin and bones. After telling him that I was a chaplain and that Lynne had sent me, he welcomed me. I sat down beside his bed and spoke a few minutes while he ate, slowly chewing each bite. Between bites he responded to my questions with one or two words. When I asked if he would like to talk about eternity he responded, "Not at this time." Knowing I would probably not see him again—I was leaving on a ministry trip—I asked if I

might briefly say something. He nodded a "yes" but seemed distant and disinterested.

I shared that I had spent a lifetime seeking the answers to three questions: First, is there a God? I assured him that after examining the evidence I was convinced that there was and that both of us will stand before Him when we die. Second, are there many ways or only one way to this Supernatural Being? In seeking to know if there were many ways to this God or only one, I had become convinced that the Bible truly is God's Word and that Jesus Christ is the only way to Heaven. Third, what does this God require of me? I had discovered that I must ask His forgiveness and accept Jesus Christ as my Savior and Lord.

Terry stopped eating and was listening intently. He said he also had been thinking about these things. He thanked me several times for coming and wanted to continue the conversation. I went on to tell how we can know Jesus Christ, and to assure him that God would forgive him and receive him into His heavenly kingdom—even at this late point in his life. He responded, "I guess God is pulling me up by my bootstraps." Asking if he wanted to receive Jesus as his Savior, he said that he did. I prayed a salvation prayer and at the end he said a clear "Amen." Terry died a little over a week later.

Isn't God's love toward us amazing? Even at the end of his life, God snatched Terry from the *fire* (Jude 23). What irony that earlier, that very day, I had read the book of Jude. Verses 21-25 state:

> Keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life. Be merciful to those who doubt; save others by snatching them from the fire.... To Him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before His glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.

Although Terry had little time to grow in his relationship with Christ and to implement these biblical principles for reaching his maximum potential, you do! So the remainder of this book will focus on helping you to accomplish this life-changing goal while experiencing an incredible journey of faith and commitment!

Count the Cost

Once you are convinced that Jesus Christ is the promised Messiah, God uniquely manifest in the flesh and the only way of salvation, know that while God's grace is absolutely free, there will be a *price to pay* for giving your life to Him. Jesus shared the importance of counting the cost before following Him. He said that one should not start building a tower without counting the cost lest he run out of money and be ridiculed when unable to finish it. Neither should a king go to war without first considering whether he is able with 10,000 men to oppose a force of 20,000. (See Luke 14:28-33.) In the same way, Jesus said, anyone who wants to be His disciple must count the cost of giving up everything for Him.

Before I was a Christian, I thought I was god; not God the Creator, but god in the sense that I was invincible! I did some crazy things because of that philosophy. Deceived by the same lie Satan used on Adam and Eve, I was walking in rebellion against the one true God. But then I came to the realization that I was *not* god—that Jesus Christ was God's unique revelation of truth. *He* was the One I needed as my Savior and Lord.

Once I examined the evidence, and was convinced who Christ is, I had to make a *choice*: Do I walk away in my pride and self-deluded rebellion? Or do I humble myself, admit my rebellion and trust in Him for my salvation? By God's grace, I chose to give Christ my life. Making a 180-degree turn, I began following Him as Savior and Lord. It is called repentance. It is dying to self and living for Jesus Christ. We must dethrone self, quit playing God, and place Christ in His rightful position as Lord of our lives. Then His goals become our goals. His desires become our desires. His will becomes our will. The Apostle Paul said it this way:

> I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me (Galatians 2:20).

To illustrate, let's pretend you are on one trapeze and Jesus is on another. You have one hand holding onto your trapeze, and one hand holding onto Christ. You want to live for Christ, but you also want to live for self. You want to obey the Lord, but you also want to have your own way and do your own thing. You want Him to be your God, but you also want to be your own god. You want to run your own life, make your own decisions, have your own goals and fulfill your own desires. Eventually the two trapeze bars go in opposite directions. You cannot hold onto both. If you try to live for both self and for the Lord, it will tear you apart.

When someone is only half-committed, trying to live for self and trying to live for the Lord, they are the most miserable of people. This is why, I believe, so many *Christians* walk around confused, depressed and discouraged; not knowing what they believe or what God requires of them. They may go out to witness and say, "Don't you want what I have?" The non-Christian says, "No thanks, I have enough problems already." Rather than having an impact on their world for Christ (as the first century believers did) their compromised lives tend to turn people off. That is why we will never influence our world for Christ unless we ourselves are first totally *sold out* to Him. There is no middle road. You cannot straddle the fence. You must totally accept or reject Him; to not totally accept Him *is* to reject Him. Do not let Jesus' words in Revelation 3:16 be true of you:

> So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of My mouth.

Count the cost and then make the wise choice: Total commitment to Christ as Lord!

Total Commitment

Everybody wants it, but few are willing to give it: Coaches want it from their players; drill sergeants require it from recruits; dictators demand it from their subjects; employers request it from their employees; teachers and professors love it in students; husbands and wives desire it from their spouses. What is this characteristic everyone wants from others? *Total commitment!*

While speaking at a pastors' conference I asked, "Do you believe in God?" Everyone acknowledged they did with a hearty Amen! So I asked again, "Do you *really* believe in God and Jesus Christ?" Same response. Then I asked, "Do you *really* believe the Bible is God's Word?" They all enthusiastically affirmed they did. So I said, "If you really believe in God, Jesus Christ and the Bible, then it should radically affect your entire life: how you live, what you watch, what you say and what you do." They got the message.

However, as I travel and minister throughout the U.S. and around the world, I find that many who profess faith in Jesus Christ—even many leaders and pastors—are not totally committed to Him as Lord of their lives.

Heart Commitment

When I use the words "total commitment," I am not talking about what you say with your mouth, or what you appear to be on the surface. I am talking about *a heart* commitment. I have learned from experience that outward appearances and words can be deceptive. Man looks at the externals, but God looks at the heart. Are your heart, motives, will, goals and desires fully committed to Jesus Christ?

A woman who was a spiritualist medium (trance channeler) claimed to believe the Bible was the Word of God, but she

misquoted numerous Bible verses to back up her erroneous beliefs. After she finished speaking, I asked for an interview and said, "Let's examine the Scriptures you quoted and see what they really say in context." Because her twisting of Scripture was exposed, she became irate and said, "I don't believe the Bible anyway; it is full of errors; it is all mythology." She confiscated my tape of the interview and threatened to "wipe out" our ministry. This woman (now deceased) believed and followed the Word of God only when it was convenient, but when it was contrary to *her* ideas, she discarded it.

Many Christians believe the Bible and live for the Lord, so long as it poses no difficulty and agrees with their preconceived beliefs and ideas. When Scripture contradicts their beliefs and ideas, they discard or deny it, or compromise and twist it to say what they want it to say. Many have a "dip and skip" mentality: They *dip* into all the promises, blessings and miracles, but *skip* all the responsibilities, commitment and obedience.

For every gift and privilege God gives, responsibility and commitment are required:

- If you want the mountaintop, you must walk through the valley.
- If you want the benefit and blessing, you must pay the price of commitment.
- If you want the victory, you must fight the battle.
- If you want the gifts of the Spirit, you must develop the fruit of the Spirit.
- If you want spiritual power, you must develop spiritual muscle.

First Place Commitment

Throughout the Old Testament, God emphasized the principle that He wants first place in our lives: When He said, "Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse," He was saying, "I must be first regarding your finances." When God said, "The seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work," He

was saying, "I must be first concerning your time." When God said, "Bring the best of the first fruits of your soil to the house of the LORD your God," He was saying, "I must be first regarding your business and livelihood." When God asked for the firstborn of all livestock He was saying, "I must be first regarding your belongings." When God said, "You must give [consecrate] to Me the firstborn of your sons," He was saying, "I must be first concerning your family."

Now, God does not *need* your money, cattle, produce or your possessions; He *wants* YOU! When Jesus was asked, "Which commandment is the most important of all?" (Mark 12:28) He answered:

> The most important one is this: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." The second is this: "Love your neighbor as yourself." There is no commandment greater than these (Mark 12:29-31).

When Satan tempted Jesus by offering Him all the kingdoms of the world, he said, "All this I will give You, if You will bow down and worship me" (Matthew 4:9). Then Jesus said to him, "Away from Me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only'" (Matthew 4:10). Jesus clearly revealed that God not only wants first place, but He must be the only Lord and God in our lives. To recapitulate:

- First in finances
- First in time
- First in business
- First in possessions
- First in family

Why does the Lord not allow anyone or anything else to be god in our lives? Because not only has He created us and deserves that unique position, but He knows that anyone or anything else

controlling our lives becomes our *god*—and eventually that god destroys us. In contrast David said, "Blessed are the people whose God is the LORD" (Psalm 144:15).

Take Up Your Cross Commitment

If you think total commitment is only for those in Christian leadership, look closely at Scripture. Luke 14:25-27 says:

> Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them He said: "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be My disciple. And whoever does not carry their cross and follow Me cannot be My disciple."

Jesus is *not* saying we are to literally hate our family or ourselves, or carry a literal cross around, but He *is* making it perfectly clear to the crowds that to be His disciple requires total commitment.

The disciples knew what Christ meant when He said:

> Whoever wants to be My disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow Me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for Me and for the gospel will save it (Mark 8:34-35).

Being well aware of Roman crucifixions, and of their context in the culture, they knew that Jesus was speaking of dying to self and of total commitment to Him. Jesus then went on to say:

> What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? If anyone is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when He comes in His Father's glory with the holy angels (Mark 8:36-38).

While ministering to the U.S. military in what was then West Germany, I had an opportunity to speak in a large house-church. Among the many West Germans and American GIs, there were also several people from East Germany, Russia, Poland, Romania and Egypt. Speaking through an interpreter, I shared parts of my testimony and the requirement to be totally committed. Many raised their hands in response to this challenge. Following the message, I remained for over an hour praying and sharing with several of the people. One man from Egypt was formerly a Muslim who spoke to me through my interpreter in a combination of broken English and German. Between us we were able to decipher what he said: We learned that when he became a Christian, his Muslim family threw him off a train in an attempt to kill him, which resulted in the loss of his arm. This man, who had paid a tremendous price for giving his life to Christ, was not requesting prayer for his difficulties; rather prayer for him to know and serve Jesus even more. This man had a strong desire to grow closer to the Lord, no matter what the cost—a desire all believers should have.

Bridge-Burning Commitment

Suppose you and I were in the military and our commanding officer said, "Up ahead is enemy territory and the only way to get there is by crossing this wooden bridge. Underneath the bridge is a body of water infested with piranhas, alligators and poisonous snakes. Once we cross into enemy territory, we are going to burn the bridge behind us so there is no going back. It's either death or victory!" Likewise, when you give your life to Jesus Christ, you make a bridge-burning commitment—no going back. When I gave my life to Jesus Christ at the age of 18, I burned *my* bridges—there was no going back to my old lifestyle.

Had I turned from the Lord, where would I go? Back to a pleasure-seeking life of immorality and violence? Back to the martial arts and eastern religions, or the power of *ki* and *ch'i*? *All* are inferior to the power of God and the relationship I have with Jesus

Christ! *None* can compare to the fulfillment Jesus Christ has given me! These are not options for me.

Could I return to *pretending* there is no God? How, when I know the reality of the God of the Bible and have experienced His goodness? To go back to New Age spirituality, to go with the flow of whatever I want to believe or do, to jump on the bandwagon with other so-called "Christians" who have compromised or abandoned their commitment to Jesus Christ and His Word, would be to deny the faithful God of my life and reject the truth of the Bible. I would forfeit God's genuine power and lose the hope that comes from knowing Him! Therefore, I am in no dilemma. There *is* no other alternative for me. I have *tried* them all. I have *evaluated* them all. There is only *one* option for me, and that is total commitment to Jesus Christ.

The Four C's

There are acceptable and unacceptable types of commitment mentioned in the Bible. Which of the following four categories is most like your commitment?

Committed to Rebellion

Are you like King Ahab who, in outright rebellion against the Lord, did evil in His sight with no desire for repentance?

> In the thirty-eighth year of Asa king of Judah, Ahab son of Omri became king of Israel, and he reigned in Samaria over Israel twenty-two years. Ahab son of Omri did more evil in the eyes of the LORD than any of those before him (1 Kings 16:29-30).

Although Ahab was king of the northern tribes of Israel, he openly rebelled against God. Similarly, there are many who name the name of Jesus Christ outwardly, but according to God's Word, their hearts are in outright rebellion in the way they live, the things they do and in their associations.

Committed (Sort Of)

Do you serve the Lord halfheartedly like Amaziah, king of Judah?

> Amaziah was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem twenty-nine years. His mother's name was Jehoaddan; she was from Jerusalem. He did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, but not wholeheartedly (2 Chronicles 25:1-2).

Wholeheartedness matters to God.

Committed (Sporadically)

Like Uzziah, king of Judah, when the Lord blessed him and he became powerful, he also became proud and turned away from the Lord.

> Uzziah was sixteen years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem fifty-two years. ... He did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, just as his father Amaziah had done. He sought God during the days of Zechariah, who instructed him in the fear of God. As long as he sought the LORD, God gave him success. But after Uzziah became powerful, his pride led to his downfall. He was unfaithful to the LORD his God... (2 Chronicles 26:3-5, 16).

Do you want to serve the Lord wholeheartedly, but have not maintained that commitment throughout your life?

Committed (Wholeheartedly)

So far we have three types of commitment: those who live in outright rebellion and do evil before the Lord; those who only halfheartedly serve the Lord; and those who wholeheartedly serve the Lord, but only for a short duration. Will you run the race for two, or even twenty years, then get weary and fall away? Or will you be like Abraham, Moses, Caleb, Ruth, Elijah, Daniel, Mary, John, Paul and the many others who made their commitment to the Lord,

and served Him with all their hearts all the days of their lives? It is this kind of wholehearted commitment that God desires.

Ponder the following account of Caleb, one of the twelve spies sent by Moses to explore the Promised Land:

> I was forty years old when Moses the servant of the LORD sent me from Kadesh Barnea to explore the land. And I brought him back a report according to my convictions, but my brothers who went up with me made the hearts of the people melt with fear. I, however, followed the LORD my God wholeheartedly. So on that day Moses swore to me, "The land on which your feet have walked will be your inheritance and that of your children forever, because you have followed the LORD my God wholeheartedly." Now then, just as the LORD promised, He has kept me alive for forty-five years since the time He said this to Moses, while Israel moved about in the wilderness. So here I am today, eighty-five years old! I am still as strong today as the day Moses sent me out; I'm just as vigorous to go out to battle now as I was then. Now give me this hill country that the LORD promised me that day. You yourself heard then that the Anakites were there and their cities were large and fortified, but, the LORD helping me, I will drive them out just as He said." Then Joshua blessed Caleb son of Jephunneh and gave him Hebron as his inheritance. So Hebron has belonged to Caleb son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite ever since, because he followed the LORD, the God of Israel, wholeheartedly (Joshua 14:7-14).

Consider the words David spoke to his son, Solomon:

> And you, my son Solomon, acknowledge the God of your father, and serve Him with wholehearted devotion and with a willing mind, for the LORD searches every heart and understands every desire and every thought. If you seek Him, He will be found by you; but if you forsake Him, He will reject you forever (1 Chronicles 28:9).

Solomon, in an act of humility, knelt down before the whole assembly of Israel and spread out his hands towards heaven as he said:

> LORD, God of Israel, there is no God like You in heaven or on earth—You who keep your covenant of love with Your servants who continue wholeheartedly in Your way (2 Chronicles 6:14).

I believe the old adage, "You are only as good as your word," and I do everything possible to keep mine. If you make a commitment to Christ today and then next week you give up, it was really not much of a commitment. A true commitment is not for just one day or one week, but for the rest of your life; it is not for just one or two hours on Sundays, but twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. We should seek to live under His Lordship and glorify Him, not only when in church, reading our Bibles, praying or witnessing, but also when we are at home, at work, at school, engaged in sports or social activities, working out at the gym—anytime and anywhere.

More On Commitment: Personal Stories

When I was on a speaking tour in Tobago, in the West Indies, I learned there were two main waterfalls on the island. One was an easy three-minute walk. Although very nice, the other one, while far more beautiful, would require a 45-minute trek through streams, over stones and rocks, across slippery ledges and through thick brush. Having a few hours of free time, my ministry team decided to go with me on the longer excursion. I was barefoot because I had lent my shoes to someone else. The bottoms of my feet were so sore the next day from hiking over the stones that I could hardly walk, but it was well worth the effort. The waterfall was awesome, forming three tiers of pools. When we swam in the cool and refreshing waters, it was like being in paradise.

Most people visiting Tobago avoid the more difficult way and are satisfied to see just the first falls. Willing to pay the price for that

which is truly worthwhile, I led the team into a breathtaking area, unsurpassed in beauty and serenity, rather than settle for second best.

For those people who settle for convenient Christianity, this is a good parallel because real blessing, power and victory manifest in the lives of those who totally commit to the Lord with all their hearts. Believe me, it is well worth it!

Before I was a Christian, I was totally dedicated to weightlifting, karate and the pursuit of pleasure. I was 100 percent committed to serving myself. How much more then should I commit my entire life to the King of kings and Lord of lords? Before I gave my life to Christ, I learned to use almost every part of my body as a weapon. I learned to use my hands, feet, knees, elbows and fingers as destructive weapons. Should I not now seek to use every part of my life to glorify the Lord?

You see, I am an "all or nothing" person. I either want to serve the Lord wholeheartedly or not at all. If I am going to live for Christ, my desire is to live for Him with all my heart, with all my mind and with all my strength. I will not settle for a superficial Christianity. I want everything God has for me. I believe you do, too. In this age of apostasy and compromise, God is raising up believers who refuse to live a nominal, shallow or imitation Christianity. They are committed to the Lord and seek to walk in sensitivity and obedience to His Word and His Spirit.

His Lordship affects everything we do and how we live. It affects:

- What our eyes see
- What our mouth speaks
- What our ears hear
- What our hands do
- Where our feet go
- What our minds think
- What attitudes we adopt
- What emotions we allow

- What our hearts desire
- How we care for our bodies (temples of the Holy Spirit)

His Lordship affects every aspect of our lives: physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. After committing my life to Christ, I had to grow. Sure, I failed many times, but I did not quit nor give up in defeat. I asked for forgiveness, and by God's grace, got back up and kept on going.

First John 2:1 (NASB) (written to believers) says:

> My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.

And 1 John 1:9 (also written to believers) states:

> If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

If a Sheep Falls in the Mud

I used to struggle with such questions as, "Does it matter if we fall into sin because we have Scriptural promises of forgiveness and liberty in Christ, or must we strive to live legalistically, trying to achieve perfection?"

A professor at Bible college helped to answer that with the following illustration. He explained that if a pig falls in the mud, it lays there and wallows in it because that is its nature. However, if a sheep falls in the mud, it gets out. It is contrary to its nature to lie in mud. So too, nonbelievers may wallow in sin without remorse or guilt, while believers who fall into sin will repent and come out as God's Spirit deals with them and speaks to their hearts.

If you continue in willful sin, then you had better reevaluate your relationship with the Lord. I am not talking about making mistakes; rather if you have a pattern of continual, willful sin, there is something wrong. You need to examine your commitment to Christ:

> No one who lives in Him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen Him or known Him (1 John 3:6).

Can I achieve perfection? Not in this life! We all struggle with temptation. However, commitment to Christ enables me to overcome any temptation so that nothing but He, Himself, controls me. I am not trying to be a self-righteous person. If you follow me around, you may see flaws and imperfections, but you would also recognize the sincere desire of my heart: to live totally for the Lord by glorifying Him in all things; to fulfill His purpose for my life and ministry. My righteousness is not that of *self*, but by the righteousness of God's Son. My salvation is not the result of works or self-effort but by faith in Jesus Christ.

We become Christians entirely by God's grace and mercy through faith. (See my book, *Who Is This Jesus?*) And, as the Apostle Paul reveals in Galatians 3:2-5, we continue to live by faith after we are saved. Paul states in Galatians chapter 5:

> It is for freedom that Christ has set us free [from unsuccessfully trying to fulfill the law to earn our salvation]. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit (Galatians 5:1, 13, 24-25).

Therefore, we must achieve a balance between God's grace and our responsibility to live under Christ's Lordship by walking in obedience to His Word. After receiving God's gift of salvation, if we do not strive to live for Him with all our being (no matter what our limitations or present circumstances are) then we are like eagles with clipped wings—not reaching the potential heights for which He created us to attain.

Like the Weather

Our commitment to Jesus Christ must not be based on feelings. We may not always feel like praying or reading our Bible or doing what God wants. Sure, we may get discouraged and want to give up, but nowhere does the Bible say we should base our relationship with Christ on feelings. We live by faith and walk in obedience to God's Word and Spirit. I feel great when the Lord blesses, but even when I do not see the blessings or answers to prayer and even when things are going wrong, I still serve Him. My feelings may change like the weather, but my commitment to Him is unchanging!

Do not serve the Lord halfheartedly all your life—or even wholeheartedly half your life. Instead, serve the Lord wholeheartedly all of your life! Devote yourself right now to wholeheartedly serve Jesus Christ the remainder of your life. You will be eternally glad that you did!

Walk in Obedience

Throughout the Old and New Testaments we meet people who offered sacrifices and demonstrated the appearance of spirituality. However, God labels many of them as lukewarm, disobedient, stiff-necked, stubborn, rebellious or apostate. Why? Because God is more concerned with the attitudes of the heart than with outward displays. God desires a people who are obedient and faithful.

King Saul learned the hard way that "to obey is better than sacrifice." Following Saul's lame excuse for only partially obeying the Lord's command, the prophet Samuel rebuked him with the following words:

> Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams. For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance like the evil of idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, He has rejected you as king (1 Samuel 15:22-23).

It is very important that we not only talk our Christianity, but that we *walk* it. Titus 1:16 states:

> They claim to know God, but by their actions they deny Him. They are detestable, disobedient and unfit for doing anything good.

All through the Scriptures we meet those who were tempted, tested and confronted by obstacles. Some disobeyed, rebelled and turned from the Lord. Others remained faithful—no matter the cost. Those who disobeyed suffered the consequences; immediately or in

the not-so-distant future. Those who obeyed received God's blessing and ultimate victory.

On Talking Back

When I was in gymnastics as a youth, my instructor would say, "Billy, climb the rope to the gym's ceiling. Do a round off and several back handsprings in a row on the mat. Get on the trampoline and do a double back flip." I did not say, "I don't feel like doing it today." I did it!

When on the high school football team, the coach would say, "Hit the sled and keep hitting it until I tell you to stop. Run the ropes. Take five laps." I did not say, "Well coach, I am not in the mood to do that today." I did it!

When my karate instructor said, "Do knuckle push-ups." I did knuckle push-ups. When he said, "You, Rudge! Come here. I want to use you for an *uke*" (knowing He was going to beat on me for a while). I did not say, "Not today, Sensei. Maybe next time." No, I stepped forward and let him demonstrate strikes and kicks on me. When I was told, "Lay down and put this potato on your chest so I can slice it in half with this sword." I did not say, "That's a bad idea." I obeyed. When he said spar and fight, I sparred and fought!

Should I obey any less the King of kings and Lord of lords, the God who created me, the God who came and died for me, who bodily rose from the dead and who is coming again to rule and reign for all eternity?

When His Word and Spirit tell me to do something, how much more should I obey without talking back or whining or complaining or making excuses? I do not say, "Well, if I feel like it, Lord," or "Maybe I will think about it," or "I don't know if I want to do that." I obey! That is what it means to be submitted to Christ's Lordship.

God's Spirit spoke to my heart a couple years ago to record the lessons He has taught me over the years, the scriptural insight He has given me and the miracles I have witnessed in His name—all by December 31, 2023. I did not understand the purpose of doing so—especially in such a short amount of time—nevertheless in spite of

many obstacles such as recurrence of my wife's cancer and numerous ministry responsibilities and family commitments, I immediately began to obey. This is an arduous goal of updating and expanding the eleven books I had previously written and writing fourteen new books. The book you are now reading is a result of my obedience to the Lord.

In all things I strive to know and obey the will of the Lord: that which is revealed in His Word, as well as that which is ascertained by the leading of His Spirit.

Is Obedience Biblical?

Is this idea of walking in obedience biblical? In Luke 6:46-49 Jesus states:

> Why do you call Me, "Lord, Lord," and do not do what I say? As for everyone who comes to Me and hears My words and puts them into practice, I will show you what they are like. They are like a man building a house, who dug down deep and laid the foundation on rock. When a flood came, the torrent struck that house but could not shake it, because it was well built. But the one who hears My words and does not put them into practice is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. The moment the torrent struck that house, it collapsed and its destruction was complete.

In John 14:15, 23-24 Jesus said:

> If you love Me, keep my commands. Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. Anyone who does not love Me will not obey My teaching.

The Apostle John tells us in 1 John 5:3:

> This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome.

God's commands and will for believers are woven into a beautiful tapestry throughout Scripture. The Gospels and Epistles provide plenty of insight and examples regarding how we ought to (and should not) live as believers in Christ.

In Matthew 7:21 Jesus states:

> Not everyone who says to Me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of My Father who is in heaven.

1 John 2:3-6 (NASB) says:

> By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. The one who says, "I have come to know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him; but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him: the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked.

The manner in which Jesus walked was in humility and obedience (Philippians 2:8). May we be inspired by Jesus' example to walk according to His will every day, and in every way!

Surrendered and Available

Once you give your life to Jesus Christ, God begins to work in and through you to accomplish His will. Philippians 1:6 says, "Being confident of this, that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." Philippians 2:13 states, "for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill His good purpose." First Thessalonians 5:24 promises, "The One who calls you is faithful and He will do it."

Pat Your Head

Sometimes when speaking to an audience I use an illustration I heard as a youth pastor. It goes something like this: I want to do a little experiment so please raise your right hand. After doing so I tell them to pat their head with it three times. On accomplishing that directive, I tell them to pull on their right ear lobe. "Before you think I have gone crazy," I say, "let me ask you. Who controlled your right hand? You or me?" Most respond, "We did." So I say, "You wouldn't have done that if I wasn't here." They change their minds and say, "You controlled it," to which I respond, "If I am so powerful, I want you to line up here and one at a time stick your finger in this light socket." After a slight pause I ask, "Why aren't you coming?" "You see," I explain, "it took two of us to accomplish these feats, my commands and your obedience. That's the way it is with our walk with Christ: His Spirit working in and through us as we cooperate and yield to Him."

Submit or Resist

The choice is yours. Either you submit and say, "Here I am, Lord. Accomplish Your plan for my life." God then molds you, leads you and enables you to achieve His purpose. Or you resist, becoming increasingly stiff-necked, obstinate, hardhearted and rebellious,

struggling against the free reign of God's Spirit in your life. Then you will not be useful in bearing fruit in Christ's Kingdom or achieving the full potential and purpose He has for you.

Will you be submissive and surrendered or resistant and rebellious? Isaiah heard the voice of the Lord asking, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for Us?" His response was, "Here am I. Send me!" (Isaiah 6:8). Isaiah went on to become one of the greatest biblical prophets.

When I first started in ministry, I was no speaker or writer and did not relate well to people. The odds were not in my favor; I had no hope of real potential. So I prayed: "Lord, here I am, I yield myself to You. No matter what it costs, I am willing to do Your will!" On my weekly fasting list was a plea: "Take my weaknesses and make them my strengths. Please speak, write and relate (witness) through me."

God has molded my life and ministry over the years—often in the wilderness of adversity. He has used my speaking engagements, radio broadcasts, audio messages, publications, witness encounters and other aspects of this ministry to have an impact on tens of thousands of people around the world.

Two Attitudes

As I deal with Christians involved in a variety of questionable or clearly unscriptural practices, I find they have one of two attitudes:

First, some respond: "I really don't care what you or the Bible says about it or how much evidence you have concerning the potential dangers." They become defensive and somehow try to justify or condone their involvement. As long as they have this attitude, God *cannot* guide and direct them to accomplish His purpose.

Second Chronicles 30:7-8 was a warning sent throughout Israel and Judah by King Hezekiah. It states:

> Do not be like your fathers and brothers, who were unfaithful to the LORD, the God of their fathers, so that He made them

> an object of horror, as you see. Do not be stiff-necked, as your fathers were; submit to the LORD....

Stephen echoed a similar rebuke which resulted in his being stoned. In Acts 7:51 he cried out:

> You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit!

Proverbs 29:1 states:

> Whoever remains stiff-necked after many rebukes will suddenly be destroyed—without remedy.

Many years ago David Wilkerson was speaking at a national convention I was attending. He gave an anointed message on purity of life and mind. He warned the pastors and leaders to turn off the filth on television. One of the pastors I knew said to me, "He's not going to tell me what to do." Later that night he went to his hotel room and watched an R-rated movie. Several years later, after losing both legs to diabetes, he was a changed man with a true heart for the Lord. He dedicated the rest of his life to missions until He went home to be with the Lord.

The second attitude, and the one God desires us all to have, says, "Father, more than anything else I want Your will for my life. I may not see anything visibly wrong with what I am doing, but I will read and search Your Word. I will get on my knees and pray and fast and be sensitive, submissive and obedient to what Your Word and Your Spirit lead me to do."

Don't Condemn

Speaking with non-Christians, I do not condemn their music, alcohol, marijuana or sins such as sexual promiscuity or occult activities. I may warn them about potential consequences, but I do not condemn them, because even though they cease that involvement, they are still lost without Christ. I share the

overwhelming evidence for Jesus and the superior peace, joy and power that are available through the resurrected Christ!

I was training Mike, a man from California, who was accompanying me to Haiti later that month on a mission trip. It was close to midnight when we went into some rough areas of Oceanside where there are many gangs, homeless and a high presence of military recruits from nearby bases. After sharing Christ with several gang members and then about 10 Marines waiting for a bus, Mike and I moved to another place in front of a gay bar. I started a conversation with a young man who quickly proclaimed, "I am gay and an atheist!" I replied, "I am not concerned about your sexual preference." The young man's response was "Wow! You are the first religious person to make that comment." I said, "First, I want you to come to know the Creator. Look into the sky and consider that there are billions of stars in billions of galaxies. Also consider your DNA and you can begin to realize how complex the universe and our bodies are. This did not happen by random chance. An intelligent Designer created us."

I continued, "God says in the Bible that if you search for Me with all your heart, you will find Me. My main concern right now is to challenge you to search for the evidence of the God who created you. Coming to know Him will lead you to Jesus Christ. Then, by His Word and Spirit, He will deal with the other issues in your life." As we parted, the young man seemed visibly touched by what and how I shared.

Don't let the enemy sidetrack you regarding peripheral issues. Remember, the Lord Jesus did not enter Jerusalem and cleanse Pilate's judgment hall or Herod's palace, but He did cleanse the Temple! Besides, when non-Christians come to faith in Christ and are truly submitted to Him as Lord, His Spirit and Word will begin to transform their lifestyles.

However, when I deal with Christians who are involved in unscriptural activities—that is different. I let them know that they need to clean up their lives, and I challenge them to become sensitive and obedient to God's Spirit and Word.

Reap What You Sow

A grandfather called me for emergency prayer because his grandson was being accused of raping four girls. His grandson said it was consensual and, because he dumped each of them, they were getting revenge. I told the grandfather that if he is guilty then he is reaping what he sowed. If he is innocent then I pray God will let the truth prevail; however, he will still suffer consequences from ignoring God's command to abstain from premarital sex.

When we are in disobedience or rebellion, we can be assured of one thing—eventually reaping what we sowed and suffering the consequences (Galatians 6:7). However, if we are honoring God, then we have His promise that all things will work together for good to them that love God and are the called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28).

One Reassuring Fact

A Christian woman, involved in a questionable practice that was spiritually dangerous, felt God was leading her to quit, although she did not know why. She saw nothing outwardly wrong with it and enjoyed participating. After talking with her, I shared some facts that she was not aware of. Tears began to flow down her face as she said, "You have confirmed what God's Spirit has been speaking to my heart." As a result of her sensitivity and submission to the Lord, He was able to protect her from a dangerous practice and lead her in the path He desired for her life.

It is reassuring to know that when you remain yielded, available and surrendered to God, it is impossible for you to get too far out of line. If you get involved with a practice or belief that is unacceptable to Him, He will speak to your heart through His Word and Spirit, and the Great Shepherd will guide and direct you back to the path of righteousness.

The problem starts when you become insensitive, stiff-necked, obstinate and hardhearted or try to justify your involvement. Then you get out of God's will and resist His Spirit dealing with you. This kind of rebellious attitude before the Lord carries one promise—that

of reaping what you have sown. But when you are sensitive and yielded to the Spirit of God and obedient to His Word, you have the promise of eventual victory, blessing, and of all things working together for good. You will be aware of God working in your life to achieve the purpose and potential He has for you.

Almost Hit by a Bus in the Himalayas

After speaking at a convention in the Himalayas of northern India, my team and I were making our way down the winding mountain roads as we headed to Calcutta. We stopped in the village of Darjeeling. Standing in the middle of a narrow road for a more panoramic view, my son and I surveyed this Himalayan village deciding which direction to go. Suddenly a bus came speeding around a sharp curve, heading straight toward us. Horn blaring, the bus maintained its speed as it rushed nearer and nearer with no sign of slowing down.

Sizing up the situation, I glanced to my right and left. Instinctively grabbing BJ, my thirteen-year-old son, I quickly tried pulling him to the left, but his impulse was to go in the opposite direction. Adjusting my momentum to accommodate his motion, I pushed him to the right. Simultaneously, he acted on my initial tug by moving toward the left! There we were in the middle of the road going in circles as this huge bus came bearing down on us. I could have jumped out of the way to save my life, but I promised my wife I would bring our son back alive. If he was going to die, then I was going to die with him on the streets of India, so I hung on.

BJ was in near panic, and I was not doing very well myself. With adrenaline flowing and my heart pounding, thoughts of how we were both going to be killed flooded my mind because buses in the Himalayas are notorious for not stopping for pedestrians. I personally have seen buses barrel down the road, stopping for no one. Young and old alike rushed to step aside or leaped to safety seconds before the speeding bus missing them by inches.

Realizing this, our situation was desperate. Then, by the grace of God, the driver realized we really were in trouble and to our

amazement, suddenly slammed on the brakes and slid to a stop no more than two feet in front of us. I remember standing there in the middle of the street after it was all over, looking at the flat front of the bus directly ahead of me thinking, "I could not even have jumped on its hood to get thrown to the side. It would have hit us, dropped us in the street, and then run over us! We would have had no hope for survival." Thank God for His mercy and protection!

The point of this illustration is that when our heavenly Father is leading us in one direction, and we insist on going in another, dangerous and sometimes fatal consequences can occur. Rather than going around in circles in your life, take your lead from the Lord.

Four Options

When I was involved in the martial arts (before the Lord led me out) the easiest way for me to lead someone's body was to lead their head. Wherever their head went, their body would follow. I used to demonstrate this with a volunteer from the audience. It was easy to lead a person who was submissive and yielded. But if they would stiffen their neck and resist, I would explain my choices:

1. I could exert more force and possibly injure his neck.
2. I could break his stiff neck.
3. I could knock him unconscious and *then* drag him wherever I wanted.
4. I could let him go his own way and bang his head against the wall, or against my knee, or whatever as a natural consequence of his resistance.

When we resist the Lord's will and refuse to submit, He also has choices:

1. He can exert more pressure in our lives to get our attention.
2. He can break our stiff necks and rebellious wills by humbling us.

3. He can knock us unconscious by not using us anymore or allow Satan to render us ineffective.
4. He can let us go our own rebellious ways and reap the consequences, until we learn and are ready to yield to his lead.

Meekness and a Strong War Horse

Throughout the Scriptures we frequently see the word "meek." Many wrongly equate the meaning of meek with its rhyming word, weak. That could not be further from the truth. When the Lord said in Matthew 5:5, "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth," He was talking about those who will rule and reign with Him.

While in Bible college, I learned that the word meek referred, in the Greek, to a strong war horse prepared for battle. With just the slightest touch on the reins, the horse would go in the intended direction of the rider. It became submissive and sensitive to the rider on its back. The horse had not lost any of its drive or dynamic power as a strong stallion but was completely under the mastery of the rider. If its spirit was broken, its strength compromised or its dynamic qualities changed, then it would have been useless for its purpose. Brought under control and submissive, it was said that the horse was now *praus*, translated "meek," or *prautes*, translated "meekness," throughout the New Testament.

Vine's Expository Dictionary states:

> It is that temper of spirit in which we accept His dealings with us as good, and therefore without disputing or resisting; and as such, we do not fight ... struggle and contend with Him.... It must be clearly understood, therefore, that the meekness manifested by the Lord and commended to the believer is the fruit of power. The common assumption is that when a man is meek it is because he cannot help himself; but the Lord was "meek" because He had the infinite resources of God at His command.

Isaiah 45:5, 9 declares:

> I am the LORD, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God. ... Woe to those who quarrel with their Maker.... Does the clay say to the potter, "What are you making?"

When horseback riding as a teen, the horse I was on was determined to knock me off. It tried to smash my legs by continually running about two inches from the trees. I had to keep pulling one of my feet out of the stirrups and lift my leg over to the other side of the saddle to avoid having it smashed against a tree. When that didn't work, the horse tried to "clothesline" me a few times by going underneath low branches. I had to keep ducking down to avoid getting knocked off.

There I was on this out-of-control horse, pulling as hard as I could on the reins in an attempt to stop it or even slow it down—so hard that its mouth was bleeding. It would not stop; it ran even faster trying all the harder to knock me off. Finally, so upset with my trying to slow it down, the horse impulsively ran off the trail and burst through a barbed-wire fence in racing back to the corral. Its chest had multiple gashes; blood mixed with sweat streaming down. My pants were ripped, and my legs had several lacerations.

That horse was rebellious! I could not control or lead it. God does not want us to be like that horse because we will bring destruction on ourselves, and possibly others. He tells us to be meek, humble and yielded so He can work in us; so He can speak to our hearts and lead us where He wants, without having to hit us over the head to get our attention or having to bloody our mouths to force us to obey.

> Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you (Psalm 32:9).

The *praus* horse also had a bit and bridle, but to get it to obey one did not have to yank the reins and bit or bloody its mouth.

Instead, one lightly pulled on the reins to guide and direct the horse: It willingly followed the master's direction. God is not telling us to be weak or a doormat. He is saying, "Have your dynamic strength, but do not resist and fight Me. Be submitted to Me."

Instead of being stiff-necked, obstinate, hardhearted and rebellious, let's be *praus*. Let's be sensitive, submissive, surrendered, yielded and available so God will work in and through us to accomplish His purpose for our lives!

Evaluate Your Motives

One of the surest ways to fall is to allow pride to rule your life. Satan fell because of pride and self-glorification which caused him to lose his position in God's presence. He enjoys seeing others fail in this same area.

God's Word has much to say concerning pride and arrogance. Let me share just a few examples. "I hate pride and arrogance" (Proverbs 8:13). "When pride comes, then comes disgrace" (Proverbs 11:2). "Before a downfall the heart is haughty" (Proverbs 18:12). "I will put an end to the arrogance of the haughty and will humble the pride of the ruthless" (Isaiah 13:11). "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble" (1 Peter 5:5).

Scripture is not talking about pride which motivates us to strive for excellence, to be the best that we can be, to stand in confidence, boldness and obedience to the Lord or to boast in the Lord as the Apostle Paul did. It is referring to the kind of pride that is haughty, rebellious, self-willed, self-centered, self-exalting and boasts in the flesh. This type of pride ends in defeat and destruction.

Thinking too highly of oneself (that you are "god") is equally as erroneous as thinking too lowly of yourself (that you are "insignificant"). The foolish and proud refuse to admit that they, and all they accomplish, are not self-made. Every human being should have the kind of humility which recognizes that we are an amazing creation—acknowledging that without the breath God put in our bodies we would not even be alive, let alone be able to achieve anything were it not for the resources God has provided on this planet. A wise and humble person proclaims:

> I praise You because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Your works are wonderful, I know that full well (Psalm 139:14).
>
> You alone are the LORD. You made the heavens, even the highest heavens, and all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to everything, and the multitudes of heaven worship You (Nehemiah 9:6).

Saul, Sennacherib and Hezekiah

History and the Bible are laced with egomaniacs, whose whole deal has been about aggrandizing themselves. They brag and boast in the flesh—for a time—but eventually they are humbled and silenced. Time is the great *equalizer* of the proud and the pompous.

King Saul fell because of pride and arrogance. He thought it intolerable that David, a young sheepherder, could detract from his popularity. Puffed up by pride and blinded by jealousy, Saul on numerous occasions disobeyed the Lord. This resulted in his eventual judgment by God and his death and devastation by the Philistines on Mount Gilboa some 3000 years ago (1 Samuel 31:1-13).

Chapters 36 and 37 in the book of Isaiah give an amazing account of pride that led to a fall, and humility that resulted in honor. Sennacherib, king of Assyria, laid siege to the cities of Judah. He sent his field commander to Jerusalem to intimidate King Hezekiah into surrendering. The field commander made such boasts as:

> Hear the words of the great king, the king of Assyria! This is what the king says: Do not let Hezekiah deceive you. He cannot deliver you! Do not let Hezekiah persuade you to trust in the LORD when he says, "The LORD will surely deliver us; this city will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria." Has the god of any nation ever delivered his land from the hand of the king of Assyria? Who of all the gods of these

> countries have been able to save his land from me? How then can the LORD deliver Jerusalem from my hand? (Isaiah 36:13-15, 18, 20).

Hezekiah went into the temple of the Lord in humility and spread out a letter containing more of Sennacherib's threats and boasting (Isaiah 37:10-14) as he prayed:

> LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, enthroned between the cherubim, you alone are God over all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth. Give ear, LORD, and hear; open your eyes, LORD, and see; listen to all the words Sennacherib has sent to ridicule the living God. It is true, LORD, that the Assyrian kings have laid waste all these peoples and their lands. They have thrown their gods into the fire and destroyed them, for they were not gods but only wood and stone, fashioned by human hands. Now, LORD our God, deliver us from his hand, so that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you, LORD, are the only God (Isaiah 37:16-20).

Isaiah 37:36-38 gives the outcome:

> Then the angel of the LORD went out and put to death a hundred and eighty-five thousand in the Assyrian camp. When the people got up the next morning—there were all the dead bodies! So Sennacherib king of Assyria broke camp and withdrew. He returned to Nineveh and stayed there. One day, while he was worshiping in the temple of his god Nisroch, his sons Adrammelech and Sharezer cut him down with the sword....

Nebuchadnezzar

Nebuchadnezzar was king of the powerful Babylonian empire. He discovered that Daniel, inspired by God, was able not only to interpret his dream, but also to tell him the details of his dream when the astrologers and wise men of Babylon could not (Daniel 2). On another occasion, Nebuchadnezzar witnessed God's protection

of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, the three young Hebrew men he had thrown into the fiery furnace for not bowing down and worshiping his golden image (Daniel 3). Nevertheless, his heart remained proud. We read Nebuchadnezzar's arrogant words in Daniel 4:30:

> Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?

While archaeological excavations reveal that Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon was truly incredible, Daniel 4:31-33 discloses how God humbled him:

> The words were still on his lips when a voice came from heaven, "This is what is decreed for you, King Nebuchadnezzar: Your royal authority has been taken from you. You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like cattle. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone He wishes." Immediately what had been said about Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilled. He was driven away from people and ate grass like cattle. His body was drenched with the dew of heaven until his hair grew like the feathers of an eagle and his nails like the claws of a bird.

However, after seven years of humiliation we read the following account in Daniel 4:34-37:

> At the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven, and my sanity was restored. Then I praised the Most High; I honored and glorified Him who lives forever. His dominion is an eternal dominion; His kingdom endures from generation to generation. All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as He pleases with the

> powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back His hand or say to Him: "What have You done?"
>
> At the same time that my sanity was restored, my honor and splendor were returned to me for the glory of my kingdom. My advisers and nobles sought me out, and I was restored to my throne and became even greater than before. Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything He does is right and all His ways are just. And those who walk in pride He is able to humble.

Herod, the Caesars, Custer…

In Acts 12:21-23, we read of an account in which Herod Agrippa did not fare as well as Nebuchadnezzar:

> On the appointed day Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people. They shouted, "This is the voice of a god, not of a man." Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died.

According to Josephus, Herod suffered terrible pain for five days before he died. Just penalty for someone who killed his wife and sons because he thought they were rivals for his throne. *The Jeremiah Study Bible* states: "No human life except his own held any value for Herod Agrippa 1."

Consider for a moment the supposedly invincible Caesars of the Roman Empire who proved at the end of their lives they were not so indestructible. The January 2016 edition of *Decision* magazine states:

> The Caesars of the Roman era seemed all-powerful. Yet one was killed by his own son, one went mad, one went blind, one was drowned, one was strangled. Two committed suicide, five were assassinated and eight were killed in battle. When

Rome finally fell, it was destroyed in a single day, on August 24, A.D. 410.

George Armstrong Custer once boasted his 7th Cavalry alone could whip all the Indians on the Plains. Yet on a hot Sunday in June of 1867, the Battle of Little Bighorn was "Custer's Last Stand."

Consider the end of Alexander the Great, Napoleon, Santa Ana (the Napoleon of the West), Hitler, Saddam Hussein and countless others whose foolish pride and arrogance caused them to defy the God of Heaven and pursue a path of vanity and egotism that ultimately led to their demise.

Humiliating Defeat

Descriptive characteristics that will become more intensive and extensive as the last of the last days approach include, but are not limited to, "lovers of themselves," "boastful," "proud," "without self-control," "brutal," "conceited," "lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God" (2 Timothy 3:1-5). However, the day is rapidly approaching when the great and the mighty will cower in fear before the coming judgment of God (Revelation 6:15-17).

Second Thessalonians 2:4 indicates that the antichrist will exalt himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped. He will speak proud words and blasphemies, and will slander God's name. He will compel the inhabitants of the earth to worship him (Revelation 13:5-8). However, his haughtiness will only last for forty-two months (Revelation 13:5), as his swift and humiliating defeat will occur at the Second Coming of Jesus Christ (2 Thessalonians 2:8) when he is thrown into the lake of fire (Revelation 19:20).

The Deadliest Man Alive

A man once acclaimed as "the deadliest man alive" asserted he taught the "deadliest and most terrifying fighting art known to man." I was greatly impressed in my early teens by his ads in comic books which promised to teach readers how to maim, disfigure and kill. However, his vanity soon vanished as he spent much of his time

near the end of his life living in fear, sitting behind a locked door with a gun on his lap. He died at age 36 in his sleep of internal hemorrhaging caused by a bleeding peptic ulcer and was buried in an unmarked grave.

Throughout the years I have seen many come on the scene who bragged and boasted about their physical strength or skills, their popularity, possessions, success, power and so on. Often, however, within a few short years (sometimes months, weeks or even days) their haughty words were silenced by failure, humiliation, injury, degenerative disease, a tragic accident or the onset of old age.

Bygone days include countless illustrations of skeptics, atheists, dictators, rock stars, actors, athletes and many others who became defiantly proud and brazenly boastful. Eventually their tongues were quieted. The historical records are strewn with the tragedies of such people.

How wise the advice of the psalmist:

> Do not put your trust in princes, in mortal men, who cannot save. When their spirit departs, they return to the ground; on that very day their plans come to nothing (Psalm 146:3-4).

How true the words of Proverbs 16:18:

> Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.

And how accurate the statement of 1 John 2:17:

> The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever.

Humility of Moses

Moses was a great leader. His humility and selflessness were clearly visible while leading Israel out of Egyptian bondage and during the wilderness wanderings. Numbers 12:3 says of him, "Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth."

Moses had higher regard for God's reputation and that His name did not fall into reproach than for his own success and honor (Numbers 14:12-19). When informed by the Lord that he was about to die, Moses was more concerned for the people he had faithfully led throughout the years, than for himself. Numbers 27:15-17 states:

> Moses said to the LORD, "May the LORD, the God of the spirits of all mankind, appoint a man over this community to go out and come in before them, one who will lead them out and bring them in, so the LORD'S people will not be like sheep without a shepherd."

Instead of leaving the people in disarray so they would see how much they needed him and what a good leader he had been, Moses' consideration was for the well-being of the people God had entrusted into his care. Moses desired God to raise up an adequate replacement for him who would succeed and not fail.

Humility and Exaltation of Christ

Isaiah 14:13-14 says concerning the king of Babylon (who many believe is a reference to Satan):

> But you said in your heart, "I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God, and I will sit on the mount of assembly in the recesses of the north. I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High" (Isaiah 14:13-14 NASB).

However, God said, "Nevertheless you will be brought down to Sheol, to the recesses of the pit" (Isaiah 14:15 NASB). In contrast, Philippians 2:5-8 (NASB) states, regarding Christ:

> Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made

> in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

As a result of this, the outcome is the exact opposite of what happened to Satan (Revelation 12:9). Philippians 2:9-11 states:

> Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Village Chief By Gate in Nigeria

Value yourself and respect others because God created each of you in His image. Never allow self-destructive behavior or tolerate thoughts of suicide because you all have exceptional inherent worth. Neither should being cruel or disrespectful to others be an option. No matter how undeserving or insignificant someone might seem, regard them with respect.

While ministering in Nigeria, I was staying at the home of the bishop who coordinated the outreaches. I love to walk through the villages and do street ministry when not speaking, but Dr. Ephraim was very protective because of the potential dangers. Although he did not want me going outside the complex, I assured him I would be fine. As I approached a nearby village, I saw an old man standing by what appeared to be the broken down remains of a city gate. Instead of ignoring him and just walking past him into the village, I acknowledged him with a friendly greeting, to which he nodded back. Later, I was informed he was the chief of that village and could have prevented me from entering. Because I respectfully acknowledged him, he allowed me to freely move about in his village.

I wondered why many of the villagers would stare at me, looking at my eyes. I discovered that some of them had never seen a white face before and most had never seen blue eyes. Several young

children began to follow. At first there were three, then ten. Soon there were 25. By the time I got back to Dr. Ephraim's, there were 70 children, mostly boys, tagging along. So I sent for one of the Nigerian pastors, who came out and spoke to them in their native language. They listened intently. Following that 20-minute message they all raised their hands to accept Christ.

There are many lessons to be learned from the above illustration, only one of which I want to emphasize here. While many people may consider Jesus Christ insignificant in their lives, just as I could have easily done with that village chief, the day approaches when Jesus, as King of kings and Lord of lords, will determine whether they gain access to His eternal Kingdom or whether they are banned from entering.

Obstacle Course Entry Teaches Most Important Lesson

I have been privileged to train various sports teams, military personnel, new military recruits and many other youth and adults on our Ultimate Challenge Obstacle & Fitness Course at the ministry center. To enter the obstacle course, participants must bend down and go under a low wooden horizontal pole supported by two vertical posts. I tell them to look straight ahead toward the woods—where they see a cross. After everyone has entered the course, I comment, "There is not a chance you are here by random chance. There is a God who created the heavens and the earth and He created each of you for a special purpose. The only way to come to know the Sovereign Lord of the Universe is to humble yourself before the cross." They get this most important message before I take them through many rigorous challenges on the obstacle course with several life-lessons.

Unlike Navy SEALs or SWCC (Special Warfare Combatant Crewmen) participants who only ring the bell when they quit, those on our obstacle course get to ring a loud silver bell when they complete the course—but only if they have done so with courage, determination and a positive attitude!

Judgment Seat of Christ

Scripture reveals that all believers will appear before the Judgment Seat of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:10), not for our sins (John 5:24; Romans 8:1), but for our motives and how we used our talents and resources. According to the *Archaeological Study Bible*:

> The Greek word translated "judgment seat" is *bema*. A bema was a raised speaker's platform from which proclamations were read and on which citizens stood to appear before officials ("The Judgment Seat" p.1891).

Romans 14:10-12 also makes it clear that "we will all stand before God's judgment seat" and "each of us will give an account of ourselves to God." The motives for everything we supposedly did for His honor will be exposed. Only that which we really did for His glory and not our own will endure. The rest will be burned as wood, hay or straw (1 Corinthians 3:11-15).

Jesus informs us we are accountable for every word we speak:

> But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken (Matthew 12:36).

There are two ways for believers to meet our Lord: rewarded or ashamed. At the Judgment Seat of Christ we will give an account of our lives, our motives and our stewardship. I believe there will be many tears shed at the Judgment Seat of Christ. Not for fear of being lost eternally, but shame for squandered finances, ulterior motives, wasted talents and lost opportunities to share the Gospel with others, as well as remorse for the hurts and pains we received or imposed on others. We may have to own up to persons we have wronged and for circumstances we have manipulated as we receive forgiveness, healing and restoration for offenses of commission (the action of committing a crime or offense) or omission (something that has been left out or excluded). If we don't make it right with certain people in this life, we may have to make it right with them

in the next. Then the Lord will wipe away all tears and remove all memories of failures, humiliations and disappointments.

Do not merely use your God-given gifts, talents and resources on that which is temporal or waste them on that which you will already receive your reward from human recognition. Instead, use them for the glory of God and invest them in that which will have eternal significance.

Ecclesiastes 12:14 says:

> For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.

Jesus said in Luke 8:17-18:

> For there is nothing hidden that will not be disclosed, and nothing concealed that will not be known or brought out into the open. Therefore consider carefully how you listen. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what they think they have will be taken from them.

Hebrews 4:12-13 states:

> For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.

First Corinthians 4:5 informs us that when the Lord comes, "He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of the heart. At that time each will receive their praise from God." Revelation 22:12 reveals, "Look, I am coming soon! My reward is with Me, and I will give to each person according to what they have done." Matthew 19:30 indicates, "But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first."

James 3:1 cautions leaders:

> Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.

First John 2:28 encourages us:

> And now, dear children, continue in Him, so that when He appears we may be confident and unashamed before Him at His coming.

Since the day rapidly approaches when each of us will give an account to God concerning usage of our time, talents and treasures, it would be wise to focus on God's priority: evangelism and missions. A significant portion of our resources, time and energy should be put into sharing the love and truth of Jesus with a lost and dying world. This not only is sound financial planning but will most certainly result in the best inheritance.

Ask yourself: Am I using my life and money primarily for personal pursuits and pleasures or to help fulfill the Great Commission of taking the Gospel to the ends of the earth? What am I doing to advance God's Kingdom and reach people for eternity before the days of opportunity are gone?

Remember: True and lasting riches consist of spiritual blessings and the legacy of faith you leave your loved ones and others. It has accurately been stated that we cannot take anything into eternity with us except the lives we touch for Jesus Christ!

Two Things That Will Destroy

When I first started this ministry, the Lord spoke to my heart that He would greatly use and bless me if I remained faithful. He warned that sin, especially pride or sexual immorality, would destroy my life and ministry if I let either get a foothold.

It is no wonder that in my walk with the Lord I have noticed a definite pattern. Every time I would get a little too "puffed up," brag

too much or become overconfident in the flesh, it was not very long before I would be humbled. When I would truly humble myself before the Lord and keep my mouth shut, He would eventually honor me. It is far better to follow the advice of Proverbs 27:2 (NASB):

> Let another praise you, and not your own mouth; a stranger, and not your own lips.

Never forgetting the Lord's initial warning concerning pride and being convinced this pattern was truly the Lord's doing, I have strongly attempted to overcome pride and bragging, and boast only in the Lord.

As I spend time in prayer and fasting, I ask the Lord to search my heart and examine my motives. I ask Him to reveal, forgive and remove any pride, haughtiness, arrogance, bragging and boasting, and by His Spirit burn it out of my life to enable me to overcome it. I ask Him to never let me forget what I was before, where He brought me from, what He has done for me and how He has humbled me when I became proud, so I will walk in humility and meekness before Him.

Matthew 23:12 states:

> For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

Proverbs 22:4 says:

> Humility and the fear of the LORD bring wealth and honor and life.

Called to Be Faithful, Not Successful

I attempt to live my life as one who must one day give an account to God for how I used the talents, finances, facilities, staff and other resources He has entrusted to me.

Colossians 3:23-24 states:

> Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.

Remember, God looks at the motives of our hearts. He has not merely called us to be successful, but foremost, to be faithful. Revelation 2:10 says, "... Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life."

When we stand before the Lord, the only opinion that will really matter is His. I don't know about you, but when I see the Lord I want to hear Him say as He did in Matthew 25:21:

> Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!

God has prepared the magnificent New Jerusalem for true believers in Jesus Christ. The whole universe will be transformed into a paradise beyond comprehension. We will have all eternity to enjoy God's limitless blessings. All He asks from us is to be faithful with the small things and opportunities He provides in this life.

Our primary goal should not be to seek a large and successful ministry, but to seek His will and His glory and to be faithful to Him. The Lord desires to greatly use those who first seek His interests and not their own.

We should learn from the example of King Saul that not only will pride and disobedience destroy us, but when we see others prospering or other ministries or churches growing and accomplishing much for the Lord, we must not allow jealousy, envy or bitterness to become rooted in our hearts.

When I see genuine ministries and churches proclaiming scriptural truth and having great response, I am overjoyed. I do not care if it is my ministry or another ministry, as long as the Lord's Kingdom is truly being advanced. First Corinthians 12:26 states

concerning the body of Christ, "...if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it."

God's Approval

It is not the one who commends himself or herself, or even the one who is commended by others, but the one who is commended by the Lord (2 Corinthians 10:12, 18). When all is said and done, the only opinion that really matters is the Lord's. He is the One we stand before to give an account of our lives. He is the One who holds our destiny in His hands. He is the One from whom we want to receive praise.

There is an eternal difference between seeking the praises of men and seeking the favor of God. The first focuses on oneself and temporal recognition, while the latter focuses on Christ and heavenly honor. Both provide rewards. Praise from people may last a lifetime but bearing fruit for God's Kingdom will last forever.

As you read the following verses, ponder whether you love praise from people more than praise from God:

> Yet at the same time many even among the leaders believed in Him [Jesus]. But because of the Pharisees they would not openly acknowledge their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved human praise more than praise from God (John 12:42-43).

Will you allow the praises of people, prestige, popularity, personal gain or pursuits of pleasure to undermine your commitment to Jesus Christ? Far better than obtaining recognition and the praises of people is to cultivate an attitude and a lifestyle that gain approval from the Lord.

True Greatness

"God's Hall of Fame"

by Walt Huntley

Your name may not appear down here

In this world's Hall of Fame,
In fact you may be so unknown
That no one knows your name;
The Oscars and the praise of men
May never come your way,
But don't forget God has rewards
That He'll hand out someday.

This Hall of Fame is only good
As long as time shall be;
But keep in mind, God's Hall of Fame
Is for eternity;
To have your name inscribed up there
Is greater more by far
Than all the fame and all the praise
Of ev'ry man-made star.

This crowd on earth they soon forget
When you're not up at the top,
They'll cheer like mad until you fall
And then their praise will stop;
Not God, He never does forget,
And in His Hall of Fame,
By just believing on His Son,
Forever—there's your name.

I tell you, friend, I wouldn't trade
My name, however small,
That's written there beyond the stars
In that celestial Hall,
For all the famous names on earth,
Or glory that they share;
I'd rather be an unknown here,

And have my name up there.

A Greater Acclaim

As a teenager I wanted to be accepted by a group of older guys so I was motivated to lift weights and train in the martial arts until I achieved that goal. However, when I became a Christian at age 18 the desire to be accepted by these guys (which I accomplished) was replaced with a passion to be inducted into "God's Hall of Fame."

The aim of my life since then has been hopefully to be included one day in what Hebrews chapter 11 refers to as "heroes of the faith." What an eternal honor that would be—well worth any sacrifice I may make to attain it!

Athletes and soldiers train hard and give their all just to hear the commendations of their coaches and commanders. Their sacrifices and tremendous efforts result in amazing feats reflecting years of discipline and commitment. But there is greater acclaim than that given by coaches, fans or superior officers—God's commendation.

The ultimate goal of my life—that for which I sacrifice, discipline myself and persevere—is to hear my Lord someday say these six words: "Well done, good and faithful servant."

There Is One I Seek to Impress

Many years ago, as a result of a trip to India, Netherlands and Israel, the mileage boosted me to Silver Elite member status and qualified me for free upgrades to first class. On a Continental flight to minister in San Diego, I got that free upgrade. Little did they know I was a "poor" missionary whose miles were from mission trips. The other passengers and the stewardesses treated me like I was one of the elite. (Karen had insisted I take the first class seat since it was earned from my previous mission trip. I would occasionally go back to visit her and ask how my "peasant" wife was doing.) About halfway through the flight a stewardess from economy class brought me a special vegetarian meal and asked, "Are you Bill Rudge who was assigned to economy class seating and

requested a special meal?" Everyone in first class stared at me like I had leprosy.

Although the perception of the other passengers in first class did not concern me, there is One whose opinion I am greatly concerned about. He is the One for whom nothing is hidden. He is the One I will one day stand before and give an account of my life. That is why I strive to live for Him with all my heart and live each day as though it may be The Day I go to meet my Lord.

Honestly Examine Your Heart

Right now take time to honestly examine your heart. What are the motives for the things you do or the ministry you have? Is it merely for the praise of men and for your own exaltation, or is it truly for the glory of God? Is it to advance His Kingdom, or merely to build your own? Is what you do and say for popularity, convenience and security, or is it in obedience to His Word and Spirit?

Make it a regular practice to get before the Lord and evaluate your attitudes and motives. Allow Him to burn out any arrogance, bragging, showing-off, rebellion, self-centeredness and self-exaltation.

When you seek to walk in humility and meekness before the Lord, and the motivation and desire of your heart is to truly glorify Him, then you have laid an important foundation for a successful life and ministry. God will use you to fulfill the tremendous purpose and potential He has for you!

A Life of Integrity

Every day brings opportunities to cheat, lie and exaggerate. We live in a society where lying and deceit are rampant and considered by many to be normal and acceptable. But are they beneficial or detrimental?

Before becoming a Christian, I had been a con artist, liar, manipulator and thief. I had stolen and robbed and cheated many people. After giving my life to Christ there were so many things that needed to change—and the God of the Bible, through His Word and Spirit, began to transform my life.

God Sees Our Lack of Integrity

I had not been a Christian very long when I decided that rather than walk downtown to buy something I needed, I would take my father's worn-out 1966 Super Sport convertible, which at the time had neither license plate nor insurance. While backing out of a parking lot, I hit a parked car. After looking around and determining that no one had seen me, I took off. But someone had seen me—God. Character is not what you do when people are watching. Character is what you do when you think no one else sees. However, Somebody does see. As Psalm 139 indicates, God sees and knows all about us:

> You have searched me, LORD, and You know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; You perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; You are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue You, LORD, know it completely.... Where can I go from Your Spirit? Where can I flee from Your presence? If I go up to the

> heavens, You are there; if I make my bed in the depths, You are there....
>
> If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me," even the darkness will not be dark to You; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to You. For You created my inmost being; You knit me together in my mother's womb. ... Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting (Psalm 139:1-24).

Proverbs 5:21 reveals:

> Your ways are in full view of the LORD, and He examines all your paths.

Deception Breeds Deception

One week after giving my life to Jesus Christ, Karen and I decided to run away to West Virginia to get married. I was 18 and she was 17. Once the clerk at the courthouse verified our ages, she told us we needed to get blood tests, and to get parental consent as well, since we were underage. After getting our blood tests in West Virginia, we went back to Pennsylvania where we filled out the marriage application form. The notary, who was a neighbor of mine, said we needed to have at least one of each of our parents sign in his presence. Knowing our parents would never sign, I deceived the notary by saying that my mom was very sick at home in bed and unable to come to sign and that Karen's mother was also unable to do so. We forged our mothers' signatures and took the form back to the notary to be notarized.

After forging the signatures, we thought that was the end of it, but we were wrong. As the Scriptures illustrate through the lives of such important biblical figures as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, deceit leads to deceit:

- Abraham deceived the Pharaoh in Egypt, and later King Abimelech, by claiming his beautiful wife Sarah was merely his sister (Genesis 12:10-20; 20:1-18).
- Abraham's son Isaac did the same thing by saying his wife Rebekah was his sister (Genesis 26:7-11).
- Isaac's son Jacob, coached by his mother Rebekah, deceived Isaac into blessing Jacob instead of Esau. Rebekah dressed Jacob to appear to be Esau. As a result, the firstborn's blessing and birthright belonging to Esau was given to Jacob (Genesis 27:1-29).

On and on, through the generations, deceit and dishonesty continued.

- Jacob was deceived by his Uncle Laban who substituted Leah, his oldest daughter, for Rachel (the one Jacob loved) after he had worked seven years for her (Genesis 29:13-30).
- Jacob's sons deceived him by taking their brother Joseph's multicolored robe, dipping it in goat's blood and showing it to their father, letting him think Joseph was killed by a wild animal. Actually, they sold him as a slave into Egypt (Genesis 37:21-36).
- For many years they let their father Jacob be deceived, until Joseph (who had risen to great prominence in Egypt by God's providence) revealed himself to his brothers in Egypt and saved his family from starvation (Genesis 45:1-11).

But back to our story: When Karen and I returned to West Virginia with the appropriate paperwork, we were informed by the courthouse clerk that we needed both sets of parents' signatures. So we lied and told her our parents were at a racetrack just down the road and we would have them sign. We forged the signatures

and returned the signed document to the clerk who said, "Okay, you can get married now."

Learning Integrity

So what happened to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? Scripture informs us that God began to work in their hearts to such a degree that they are presented in Hebrews chapter 11 as heroes of the faith!

- Abraham grew so much in faith that he was willing to offer his son on the altar as a sacrifice before God.
- Jacob was humbled by God; he wrestled with an angel who touched his hip and caused him to walk with a limp the rest of his life, showing us that God will not let anyone get away with deceit and a lack of integrity.
- Joseph's brothers were changed men when he met them years later in Egypt, and they became heads of the tribes of Israel.

Years passed before Karen and I realized that the minister who married us never sent us a copy of our marriage license. We wondered whether he even recorded it at the courthouse, and even if our marriage was legal since we forged the signatures. Not certain of the name of the city we were married in, and not wanting the hassle of tracking everything down, we forgot about it.

However, in February of 1994, while working on my records for a future book entitled *The Impossible* and for this Integrity chapter, I decided to get a copy of our marriage certificate—if one existed. By doing some research into our old scrapbooks, I discovered we were married in New Cumberland, West Virginia. I talked on the phone to the Hancock County clerk and told her I was compiling information for an upcoming article and book. She was most cooperative and even went to the courthouse basement to dig out the records from 1971. She graciously sent us a copy of our marriage certificate.

I told her that when we ran away to get married, I was a brand-new Christian and we had forged our parents' signatures. She replied that regardless of that, the marriage was still legally binding, and many people had often lied about their ages and later wanted to change the records for Social Security or some other reason. She said that now, if someone is under 21, both parents have to come in person to sign.

She was happy to hear that we got our start in West Virginia and were still married and was excited to hear how God had worked in our lives and ministry. In appreciation for her help I sent her some books and pamphlets I had written and several of our ministry newsletters.

Like our forefathers in the faith, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, God has brought us a long way. We suffered many consequences and challenges because of our youthful deceit, but God takes each of us where we are and works in us by the power of His Holy Spirit to transform our lives.

Stolen Items

Before giving my life to Christ, I had stolen hundreds of dollars' worth of merchandise. A Christian for only a few months, God's Spirit began to deal with me, and I began to return things to the different stores and places from which I had stolen them. At first I took back the things I liked the least: the rock albums, the clothes, the jewelry and the colognes. Then after a few more weeks, God's Spirit dealt with me even more strongly, and I looked for more things I had stolen. I returned a billy club, bayonet and other weapons. Finally, a few weeks later, God's Spirit came heavily upon me to get rid of everything. I returned the weights, the remaining clothes, my favorite speed bag and other things I knew I could never afford, but I had to obey.

As new teenage Christians, Karen and I even took money to some of the stores where we could not return the items because they were ruined or lost. The store clerks were bewildered. I told them, "Listen, I stole things before I was a Christian. Now I am a believer

in Jesus Christ. Please take the money." They thought we were crazy, but before my Lord, I wanted to maintain my integrity.

Little Things Matter

Although God dealt with me about blatant thievery, deceit and dishonesty as a young Christian, I saw nothing wrong with the little things I tried to justify. You know the type of rationalizing: "They make me work extra hours at the window factory and don't pay me very good money, so it is no big deal if I take some nails. Besides, all the other Bible college students who work there are taking them, and they have been Christians much longer than me." We also rationalized about other things when I worked for a company selling life insurance and financial investments with a few other Bible college students. Although we never outright lied, we led customers on by making our investments sound better than they were. Deceit can be a subtle thing.

As I grew in the Lord, I began to learn the reality of Isaiah 33:14-16. It refers to God as a consuming fire and asks, "Who of us can dwell with the consuming fire?" The answer is, "Those who walk righteously and speak what is right, who reject gain from extortion and keep their hands from accepting bribes...." God slowly burned deception and dishonesty out of me as fire purifies metal.

A woman brought me a padlock to put on the gate of our ministry center's new fence. After inquiring where she got it, I discovered that the lock had been taken from her husband's place of employment. She thought I was making a big deal out of nothing and claimed that other ministers had accepted the locks. I said, "Even though it seems insignificant to you, if I keep this lock, I will be compromising my integrity before the God whom I seek to walk before with a clear conscience and a pure heart; the God who has given me this land and this building, and who has blessed and greatly honored this ministry. I do not want to dishonor Him in any way, and I do not want to lose His presence or His blessing." God is opposed to dishonesty in little things. No one will get away with

making light of little acts of lying and deceit. The Bible says in Luke 16:10:

> Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much.

Stolen Candy

While buying some office supplies for our ministry, the female clerk asked me if I remembered her. Being not quite sure who she was, she informed me that in high school I used to rummage through her purse and take all her candy and snacks. So a few days later I went out and bought her some candy to pay her back for all I must have stolen from her purse.

Several years later it was brought to my attention that I had pilfered candy from the purse of another classmate in high school. Upon being informed who she was, my wife and I went out and bought candy to give to her and her husband. They received it joyfully.

A Good Name Is Better Than Riches

Over the course of a year someone had donated several hundred dollars to our ministry and to several other ministries. We later learned that the money had been embezzled from where this person worked. The owners of the company were upset. They wanted all the organizations who received the embezzled monies to voluntarily pay it back immediately.

Although we had no legal obligation to do so, and did not have the money to spare, we decided to comply with their request. To me our testimony was more important than money. Besides, paying back the money would help reduce the debt of the person who was accused of the embezzling.

We were the first ministry to pay back the money, and as a result, were spotlighted in the media. A woman who was impressed that we had agreed to pay back the money gave us a check for the total

amount. The company the money was embezzled from continued to support our ministry.

The Pain and Benefits of Integrity

What are the benefits of choosing a life of integrity—even in little things? Sometimes the value of choosing to live honestly is nothing more than a clear conscience and restful night of sleep. Other times you can actually see the hand of God bless in a material way. For example, I had just finished doing two school assemblies in West Virginia. Traveling with my family through the mountains of Virginia to my next engagement in Baltimore at a large African American church our 1985 Chevy Astro van completely shut down at sunset. Towed to a Chevrolet dealer, it was discovered that because of an oil leak the engine was blown. An improperly tightened oil plug was the cause; apparently an act of negligence on the part of the place that last changed the oil. The cost to replace the engine with a new one was about $2,000, and $1,700 for a rebuilt one. We wondered if the extended warranty would cover it since it was an oil leak. The service manager said that if I replaced the rubber oil plug with an original metal one the van would be covered by the warranty.

Here is where it hurts. I told him I was a Christian and would not do it. I also could have asked the place that changed our oil to pay for the expenses, but they had been donating their services for several years, so I didn't even mention it to them. So, what do we do, being stranded in a remote area without a vehicle? After prayer for the Lord's guidance and help, we were able to get a rental car and continued to Baltimore and to our other scheduled engagements. The Astro van was towed back to Pennsylvania and the rental car was graciously returned to Virginia on that tow truck without an additional charge. A local Chevrolet dealer put in a rebuilt engine for the discounted price of $1,400. Several people gave toward the cost, as the Lord provided all the money.

Not only were we able to be a good witness to all the people involved, we also saw the material blessing. The dealer who replaced the engine agreed to a unique deal. He bought a car the

ministry needed and that would fit our budget; then traded us even, the van for that car. So not only had the Lord provided us with the van for three-and-a-half years, He blessed us with a car that was like brand-new without spending a cent. I believe what made this all possible was our refusing to compromise on such a little thing as an oil plug.

Five Dollars Becomes $1,800

Later, our water distiller no longer worked but the 1-gallon plastic water collector was still like new. Rather than discarding it, Karen decided to sell it on E-bay for a minimal cost that would at least cover the postage to mail it to the buyer. She always encloses one of my books as an additional gift and as a spiritual inspiration.

Karen received a response from a man who wanted to buy the 1-gallon plastic water collector at a lower price but she said she couldn't because the price she was asking barely covered the postage. The man then paid the asking price. When Karen received the payment, she realized that a shipping fee had been added to the amount he paid. Realizing that it was not free shipping for the buyer as she had thought, she refunded the $5.00 shipping fee to him with a brief note of explanation. He thanked her for her honesty, and within hours, he went to our website and donated $1,800 online to the ministry. What an unexpected blessing that helped at a crucial time. God is always faithful and uses our longtime ministry friends as well as new friends—some whom we have never even met.

All in a Decimal

Another of the many examples I could cite occurred when Karen received an order for two of my booklets from an ad in a magazine. However, she noticed the enclosed money order was for $250 instead of $2.50. With the volume of mail Karen has to deal with, she could have easily deposited it, not taking the time to check it out thinking that maybe this person wanted to give an additional contribution as many people do. However, she felt it was a mistake. She notified our local post office who then contacted the Florida

post office which issued the money order. The clerk at that post office greatly appreciated our honesty because she would have had to pay the difference of $247.50 out of her pocket.

Gimmickry and the Gospel

Honesty and integrity are obviously lacking in much of the secular world. Sad to say, even in many churches and ministries today, financial scandals, fraudulent fundraising and merchandising the Gospel are rampant. Some use manipulation to control followers, coercion to obtain funds or gimmicks to generate growth and excitement. Others charge exorbitant fees for their services and resources.

How far removed we are from Jesus' words to His twelve disciples of, "Freely you have received; freely give" (Matthew 10:8). Choosing to operate on this biblical principle of "freely giving" I do not personally charge for speaking engagements, books, tracts, audio messages, the obstacle course, defense clinics, school assemblies or other services and resources our ministry provides. One of the points in my prayer and fasting list reminds me: "I own no possessions for all I have is Yours." I realize that God is my Source—I do not own a house or vehicle—and have little retirement since I gave most of it away and waived out of Social Security. Nevertheless, I persevere in faith knowing that He has met my needs thus far and will continue to do so as long as I continue to honor and obey Him.

Some pastors and ministry leaders who misuse funds enrich themselves with great material wealth from those who have given sacrificially. Some of them have suggested that donors give multiple tithes or even borrow money to donate to them! Religious shysters sometimes use "anointed" artifacts or promise healing and special blessings to those who give generous donations. In contrast to this deceitful gimmickry and blatant merchandising of the Gospel, the Apostle Paul stated:

> Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity,

as those sent from God (2 Corinthians 2:17).

We had better heed the words Elisha spoke when offered a gift after Naaman was healed of leprosy:

"As surely as the LORD lives, whom I serve, I will not accept a thing." And even though Naaman urged him, he refused (2 Kings 5:16).

Yet Gehazi, Elisha's greedy servant, deceitfully hurried after Naaman to receive something for himself. Elisha strongly rebuked him as recorded in 2 Kings 5:26-27:

> Elisha said to him, "Was not my spirit with you when the man got down from his chariot to meet you? Is this the time to take money or to accept clothes, olive groves, vineyards, flocks, herds, or menservants and maidservants? Naaman's leprosy will cling to you and to your descendants forever." Then Gehazi went from Elisha's presence and he was leprous, as white as snow.

God severely rebuked the High Priest Eli and his sons for scorning His sacrifices and fattening themselves on the choice parts of the offerings made by His people Israel (1 Samuel 2:29). How much more will God rebuke those today who make themselves fat on the sacrificial offerings of His people?

Paul's last words to the elders of Ephesus should inspire all of us:

> You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia. I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus Himself said: "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:18, 33-35).

Jesus said during His famous Sermon on the Mount:

> Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven.... For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Matthew 6:19-21).

Samuel was a person of integrity throughout his life. Before his death he asked the people of Israel to evaluate him before the Lord:

> I have been your leader from my youth until this day. Here I stand. Testify against me in the presence of the LORD and His anointed [the king]. Whose ox have I taken? Whose donkey have I taken? Whom have I cheated? Whom have I oppressed? From whose hand have I accepted a bribe to make me shut my eyes? If I have done any of these things, I will make it right. "You have not cheated or oppressed us," they replied. "You have not taken anything from anyone's hand." Samuel said to them, "The LORD is witness against you, and also His anointed is witness this day, that you have not found anything in my hand." "He is witness," they said (1 Samuel 12:2-5).

Despite varied opportunities to obtain temporal material gain through taking advantage of people or circumstances, believers and Christian leaders must walk before the Lord and the world in integrity. Financial scandals will cease in the body of Christ if believers and Christian leaders truly believe God's Word, for when the Lord comes, "He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of the heart" (1 Corinthians 4:5).

Psalm 11:7 proclaims:

> For the LORD is righteous, He loves justice; the upright will see His face.

Once you make a heart commitment to walk upright before the Lord, a life of integrity will become as natural as breathing—and as essential.

A Word from Gert on Integrity

"As I proofread an article on integrity for an upcoming newsletter, I remembered an incident that happened shortly after I began to volunteer at the Bill Rudge Ministries. June Merchant and I were unpacking a box of items that had been donated to the ministry for an overseas destination. I opened a box containing an assortment of pens, pencils and rulers. I picked up a couple of nice pens, handed one to June and suggested we use them at the ministry.

"Bill just happened to come into the room as I said the words to June. He stopped quickly, looked at me and said most distinctly: 'Understand something, Gert, anything that is donated to us for a specific purpose outside our ministry is never to be used by us. Please put the stuff back in the box and keep in mind that our integrity is at stake when we are entrusted with things that are donated. It all goes to whomever it has been designated. None of it stays here.'

"I have not forgotten the earnestness with which Bill said it, nor have I forgotten the intent that the integrity of the ministry is at stake."—Gert Wooten

$10,000 Loan

We built our first ministry center on faith—not a penny of interest was paid nor was any money borrowed from a bank. When we were almost finished in March of 1982, I encouraged our staff and Board to pray, fast and believe the Lord would provide $10,000 that month to meet some of the remaining expenses for building materials.

Shortly thereafter, a woman asked me, "Would you be offended if I offered to loan the ministry a large amount of money that you could pay back in three years without any interest?" I asked how much she was talking about and she said, "As much as you need." I

reminded her that she could make a lot of interest by investing it, but she definitely felt the Lord wanted her to lend it to us. I told her I would not even consider it unless she prayed about it for the next week, and then said to her, "If in a week you change your mind, fine, but if not, then I will share it with my Board."

A week later she said she still felt the Lord would have her to do it. Although she would have lent us more, because we had been asking the Lord for $10,000 that month, that is the amount I felt led to accept. She met with our Board and they approved the agreement. The Lord blessed and we were able to pay her back ahead of schedule.

$1,000 Gift

A few years later we felt led to build an addition—again on faith and without paying any interest. It was the middle of March 1986, when it hit us how crazy it seemed to begin building a large addition with our finances so tight. Yet we knew the Lord wanted us to enter this venture, and He is always faithful. About this time, a man stopped by the ministry center. He gave me a check for $1,000 toward our new addition, informing me that he had been saving the money to repair his home. I did not want to take his money, and suggested he use it for his home as planned. But he insisted, stating that he had spent much of the morning in prayer, and he felt strongly led by the Lord to give the $1,000; his wife felt the same way.

Not For Sale

Sometimes we cannot defend ourselves or what we appear to do; we must handle ourselves with integrity until the Lord vindicates us. This has happened to me several times. For example, I began to sense the Lord's leading to sell the ministry center (an ideal facility which consisted of a mini-gym, all-purpose room, reception area, several offices, prayer room, radio studio, media room, fitness room and outside property used for recreation and an obstacle course). This would provide needed funds to produce tens of thousands additional copies of my books and audio messages to meet

increasing requests from around the world for our free resources and also expand other ministry outreaches. My goal was to relocate to a smaller facility in the area (with many of our staff and volunteers working from their homes) enabling us to continue the growth of the ministry while lowering overhead expenses.

I was strongly advised not to put a For Sale sign on the street in front of the ministry center because it would result in a loss of support due to the uncertainty of where we would relocate. Nevertheless, I felt that to be noble and transparent, the realtor should put up the sign. They were right about losing support—we lost almost one third of our regular donations while the building sat unsold. To make matters worse, a rumor circulated from a source who deliberately distorted the facts, telling people that I was keeping the money personally and moving to California (where our daughter was then living).

Nonetheless, as we moved forward in obedience to the Lord and did what was upright, He honored us. During the construction of our future ministry center (we stepped out in faith) and while the current ministry center sat unsold, a man I do not recall meeting, but who had heard me speak (I was later told) left a large amount of money—the largest donation ever made to the ministry—in his will. It was just what was needed to make up for losses while the ministry center went unsold. When I meet this man in eternity, I will be certain to thank him!

When later we dedicated our new ministry center on our original property—subdivided from and adjacent to the former ministry center—many people came to the Open House. With tears in her eyes, a woman who had discontinued support because of us selling the ministry center apologized and began to support again—along with many new supporters. And instead of moving the ministry headquarters to California as falsely rumored, my daughter and her family moved to Pennsylvania—volunteering in many ways to help with the expanding ministry. God is faithful to defend us; we just have to maintain our integrity and let our lives resonate the truth and love of Jesus Christ.

A Verbal Commitment and Handshake

In January of 2001, I sold my dream—the ministry center—to have additional funds to reach the world. That in itself is a long and amazing story. However, what I want to focus on is that by a mere verbal agreement and a handshake the deal was done—there was no contract at the time. Shortly thereafter, a doctor called to offer cash for our building, payable the next day. I explained that I had made a verbal agreement with the Area Agency on Aging, and my word was as good as a contract.

At the dedication of the new building for the Mercer County Area Agency on Aging a state representative commented how amazed he was that by a mere verbal agreement and a handshake the sale of our former ministry center was accomplished. He went on to say that it would be great if all government agreements and transactions could be done in the same manner.

Only As Good As Your Word

"You are only as good as your word" is a principle I seek to live by. I am reminded of my fifth trip to Haiti: I gave my word to a former voodoo witch doctor in Haiti that I would return to see him. Yet, every imaginable obstacle and dangerous circumstance rose up to thwart the fulfillment of that promise:

- I was told by the host mission I could not come because they were expecting violence against Americans. Haitians had blocked roads and stopped some American missionaries, harming them and damaging their vehicle.
- There was to be a nationwide strike and there would be much violence since there had already been several deaths from recent demonstrations.
- Because of a gas shortage they could not run the generator at the mission compound.
- The Iraq war was on the near horizon and things were very unstable and volatile.

Nevertheless, I felt compelled to go because I had made a promise, and this was the only opportunity I would have for several years to return. So in spite of other obstacles and impossible circumstances, the Lord made the way possible.

Before we left Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti, for Gonaives, I told some vendors outside the mission guest house I would buy something when I returned. One of the women yelled out in Creole, "They all say that, but they never keep their word." I assured her I would keep my word but she did not believe me. Several days later I returned. She was elated to see me and as promised, I bought souvenirs from her and the other vendors. They were most appreciative and repeatedly said, "You kept your word! You kept your word!"

I promised my dad on his death bed I would take care of my mother. For 21 years I kept that promise—sometimes joyfully and a few times under great duress. Then I promised my mother I would do everything possible to get all our family members into Heaven with her. That was sometimes a difficult promise, but I persevered in sharing the love and truth of Christ with a growing family of several generations. Thus far, all who have gone on have done so with faith in the Lord!

Walk as Royalty

Believers in Jesus Christ have an exciting destiny—to rule and reign with Him throughout eternity! Considering this high calling of serving as royalty under the King of Kings, it is imperative that our words, attitudes and actions resemble His. *Princes* and *princesses* in God's Kingdom should be a reflection of their LORD.

A few years ago, while speaking at a military memorial service, I sat between two dignitaries. They were both gracious and complimentary of the words I spoke. However, what I want to emphasize here is that they handled themselves with dignity.

There is just something different about most dignitaries and royalty in the way they carry themselves. How much more should we, who are "co-heirs" (Romans 8:17) with the very Son of God,

carry ourselves with dignity in our public and private lives. We should not be a reproach to His name but conduct ourselves in a respectable manner.

Just as descendants of a reigning king are prepared for their royal positions, so believers begin on this side of eternity to prepare for our royal positions which will assuredly become reality during the millennium and forever thereafter. The following qualities and attributes should begin to be manifest in our words, attitudes and behavior: dignity, integrity, righteousness, self-control, courage, compassion, humility, gentleness, generosity, kindness and faithfulness.

When I was 12 years old, I was very skinny so I started lifting weights. Even though I remained thin for a long time thereafter, I began to walk and handle myself as if I was this strong person—believing I would eventually become like that—and a few years later I did. Likewise, I know that one day I will rule and reign with Jesus Christ so I can begin now to think and behave accordingly.

Just as my thin physique was transformed into muscles as a teenager—one day my mortal body and humble existence will be transformed into a glorified body that will rule with Christ. This will most assuredly become a reality for those who believe in, and commit their lives to, Jesus Christ. Let's begin acting like it in faith and confidence now!

John, a friend I made while in San Diego, is part Mexican and part American Indian. He has a positive attitude, strong faith in Christ and is very talented. He told me that he used to see himself as skinny, dingy and ugly but now sees himself as lean, tan and distinct. He said that change of perspective has made a tremendous difference in how he carries himself.

Our High Calling

Always remember that as Christians we have the highest calling. No matter what our position or social status in this life, we can hold our heads high because one day we will be dignitaries serving as

representatives for all eternity of the KING and LORD of the universe.

> You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9 NKJV).

First to Last Sin

What is the last sin mentioned in the Bible? It is the same as the first sin: lying. Satan lied to Eve by distorting what God said (Genesis 3:1-5). In the last two chapters of Revelation, God strongly warns about lying. Perhaps one of the reasons God mentions lying as the last sin in the Bible (Revelation 22:15) is because it was Satan's lie that resulted in the fall of humankind (Genesis 3:1-5).

Scripture makes it clear that believers are not to be conformed to Satan's image. Satan is a liar and the father of lies (John 8:44). We are to be conformed to the likeness of Jesus Christ (Romans 8:29) who walked in truth and integrity.

Revelation 21:8 (NKJV) alarmingly indicates that, "all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death".

Revelation 21:27 reveals that no one who does what is "deceitful" will enter God's Holy City.

And Revelation 22:15 makes known that, "everyone who loves and practices falsehood" will not be permitted to enter God's eternal Kingdom.

The Promise

In contrast, Revelation 22:14 promises:

> Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city.

God has prepared the New Jerusalem for true believers in Jesus Christ. The whole universe is at our disposal. We have all eternity to enjoy His blessings. If we have been faithful over small things, He will make us ruler over much (Matthew 25:21).

The only way for us to enter the New Jerusalem to rule and reign with Christ for eternity and to have everything He has prepared for those who love and obey Him is through faith in Jesus Christ. If you quit lying today, if you quit deceiving, if you quit stealing—if you quit all the things wrong in your life—and you do not put your trust in Jesus Christ for salvation, the Bible says you will still be unable to enter the New Jerusalem.

Those who have been redeemed by Christ, whose names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life, must live like the One we claim to follow. We must continually allow God to crucify and burn out of us any deceit, exaggeration, falsehood and lying, and instead strive by His grace to be upright, honest and truthful.

Frank Outlaw sums up the importance of character:

> Watch your thoughts; they become words. Watch your words; they become actions. Watch your actions; they become habits. Watch your habits; they become character. Watch your character; it becomes your destiny.

The Highest Example of Integrity

Jim Weikal, a friend and coworker in ministry, makes the following insightful comment:

> The highest example of integrity and honesty is God Himself. This quality is important to believers because we represent Him here in this fallen world. Believers are examples to unbelievers every day whether we like this role or not. It's just the way it is. When we fail to live up to His standard, we sully God's reputation as well as our own and hurt those in our sphere of influence. We need to realize that men and women in the church will disappoint, fail or even disgrace the

name of Christ. But we don't serve them; we serve God. He does not disappoint! According to Numbers 23:19, "God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should change His mind. Does He speak and then not act? Does He promise and not fulfill?" (Also check out Psalm 89:35; Titus 1:2; Hebrew 6:18.)

My Prayer

God is looking for people of faith, valor and power who will stand up and have an impact on this world for Christ in these last days. He is also looking for those who will not be compromised by dishonest gain, lying lips or deceptive motives. He is looking for men, women and young people who will live a life of integrity before Him and this world. That is why my prayer is:

Lord, I am a person who was far from Your standard and made many mistakes. But early in my walk with You, You began to burn deceit and dishonesty out of me. Your Word and Spirit have taught and enabled me to overcome and walk upright before You. Forgive me when I fail. Cause me to always speak the truth in love without ulterior motives for selfish gain. Help me to honor You in all things.

I also pray that Your Spirit speaks to the hearts of every person reading this book. Reveal any area of their lives where they are allowing deception, lying lips, dishonest gain or selfish motivation. Bring them to repentance; give them the assurance of Your forgiveness. Put within them a desire to walk in integrity all the days of their lives. In Jesus' name. Amen!

Establish Balance by Being Physically, Mentally, Emotionally and Spiritually Fit

Luke 2:52 tells us, "Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men." He developed a *balanced* life. As believers we, too, should live a balanced life. God cares about our total well-being.

Yet, the truth is that many Christians are out of balance. Some care only about the spiritual and ignore the physical, while others place too much emphasis on the physical and too little on the spiritual. Many are out of proportion—like my older teenage friend who lifted weights with me. He focused on his upper body but neglected his lower body (as did many body builders back in the 1960s). He had a massive chest, back, shoulders and arms, but skinny legs. His out of proportion physique looked awkwardly unbalanced.

As I read in Scripture concerning God's precise requirements for construction and care of the tabernacle and temple in the Old Testament, I realize the tremendous responsibility to take care of my body, the temple of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, I will focus a little more on the physical dimension in this chapter.

Your motivation for being in physical shape should not merely be that it is the current trend or because you want to wear more revealing clothes to impress others with your physique. Instead, your ultimate goal should be to glorify God with every aspect of your life. While it is wonderful if we can add ten or fifteen quality years to our lives with good, healthful living, far more important, is that we come to know the source of abundant and eternal life,

Jesus Christ. He said, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full [abundantly]" (John 10:10).

Balanced Lives through Total Health and Fitness

One of the main goals of my ministry is to challenge believers to reach their maximum potential in Christ—physically, mentally, emotionally and above all spiritually. To achieve our maximum potential, we must develop balanced lives.

Physically, our bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit and should be "living sacrifices"—totally committed to the Lord in every aspect for His honor and glory (1 Corinthians 6:19-20; Romans 12:1). We must not yield our physical bodies to sin and unrighteousness or live self-gratifying, self-destructive lifestyles.

Mentally, we are to be transformed by the renewing of our minds—taking captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ and having the "mind of Christ" (Romans 12:2; 2 Corinthians 10:5; 1 Corinthians 2:16); and thinking about and dwelling on that which is true, honorable, right, pure, lovely and praiseworthy (Philippians 4:8). Our minds are the spiritual battlegrounds, so we must always keep them on guard. We must not fill them with trash or put them in a passive, neutral, nonresistant mental state where we could be susceptible to deception and manipulation.

Emotionally, we must not allow negative and destructive feelings such as worry, fear, jealousy, bitterness, hate, revenge, greed, impatience and pride to dominate our lives. Instead, they must be replaced with the fruit of the Spirit, which is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). By an act of our will and of our own volition we can choose to resist fulfilling the lusts of the flesh, and instead be led by the Spirit, resulting in inner peace and emotional health.

Spiritually, we are created in God's image and are to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ (Romans 8:29), filled with and walking in the Spirit, producing the fruit of the Spirit and manifesting gifts of the Spirit (Galatians 5:16, 22-23; Romans 12:6-

8; 1 Corinthians 12 and 14). We must not allow anyone or anything other than our Creator to be *God* in our lives nor are we to be conformed (like Satan) to an image of pride and rebellion.

"…May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thessalonians 5:23). May our thoughts, attitudes, emotions, desires, goals, dreams, visions, motives of our hearts, words of our mouths, behaviors and lifestyles honor the Lord and reflect His character. May our passion be to serve the Lord wholeheartedly for our whole life with our whole being.

The most important principle of health is to "Fear [reverence] the LORD and turn away from evil. It will be healing to your body and refreshment to your bones" (Proverbs 3:7-8 NASB). Seek Him daily—preferably first thing in the morning. Find wisdom and strength for your day and your life in His Word and by His Spirit.

The Discipline of Daniel

As a youth, Daniel was taken captive to Babylon. There, he lived in a pagan, idolatrous, self-gratifying, occult environment, yet he remained true to the God of the Bible. Daniel had physical discipline and self-control. He made a decision not to defile himself with the king's choice food or wine (Daniel 1:8). He had mental discipline. He did not fill his mind with or rely on sorcery and occultism (Daniel 2). He had spiritual discipline. He made a commitment to pray three times a day—even though it could cost him his life (Daniel 6).

God gave Daniel favor because he honored and obeyed Him with every aspect of his life. He was healthier than those who ate the food given to them by the king. When the magicians, conjurers and sorcerers could not tell Nebuchadnezzar his dream or the interpretation, Daniel did. God protected Daniel from certain death in the lions' den because he was resolute in his commitment to Him.

Do Not Neglect the Physical

Many Christians believe that exercise is of little value. They base their opinion, in part, on the words of the Apostle Paul to Timothy, "For bodily exercise profits a little, but godliness is profitable for all things, having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come" (1 Timothy 4:8 NKJV). When I was a new Christian and thought I would have to give up working out after reading 1 Timothy 4:8, a wise minister said to me, "The little that physical exercise does profit is very important, and not to be neglected." Exercise is like tires on a car—small in comparison to the rest of the vehicle, but crucially important.

Don Colbert, M.D. comments on this verse in his book, *What Would Jesus Eat?* :

> Biblical times were vastly different from today with regard to people's need for additional "bodily exercise." When Jesus walked the earth, most people walked from three to ten miles a day in the course of their daily lives and work. The people did not need to engage in additional exercise. Extra exercise was usually only done in the Roman Empire to increase muscle size and strength for participation in spectator sports. Certainly Paul valued physical health; he simply believed that getting bodily exercise for the purpose of engaging in sports was not as profitable as using one's time and energy to develop spiritual strength.

Bodily exercise and nutrition have temporal profit and are not to be neglected, but knowing Jesus Christ and His Word have eternal benefits! Paul counseled Timothy that *godliness* promises benefits for this present life and for the life to come; so I spend the majority of my time (approximately 40 - 60 hours a week) in Bible study, prayer and ministry and a minority of my time (about 4 - 6 hours a week) exercising and working out. The simple biblical principle that has proven to be of immense value in bringing balance to me is: "Focus on the spiritual while not neglecting the physical."

The Apostle John's letter to his dear friend Gaius infers that the prosperity of the soul has a benefit on the whole person. It states: "Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well" (3 John 2). Concerning this verse *The MacArthur Study Bible* states, "Gaius' spiritual state was so excellent that John prayed that his physical health would match his spiritual vigor."

Since my priority has been making certain my "soul prospers," the Lord has blessed me in many ways and given me abounding energy to accomplish the vision He placed in my heart. My prosperity is not in material wealth, but in His peace and joy that transcend life's circumstances.

"A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones" (Proverbs 14:30). "A joyful heart is good medicine, but a broken spirit dries up the bones" (Proverbs 17:22 NASB).

Life Is a Marathon

Like an athlete preparing for his next contest, I discipline myself and am constantly training (exercising, eating nutritionally, fasting, praying, studying Scripture and so on) to be a more effective witness for Christ, to better handle the daily stresses of life, to be able to fulfill an oftentimes rigorous ministry schedule, to be prepared for the rigors of my next mission adventure and to participate in physical activities with my grandchildren. My goal is to have the health and vitality to fulfill God's purpose and finish the race He has called me to run.

Life is not a 100-yard dash, but a marathon. Pace yourself by spending time waiting on the Lord, cultivating relationships with family and friends and taking care of your health. Then, you will not spend yourself prematurely and look back upon your life with regret.

"Those who wait on [hope in] the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint" (Isaiah 40:31 NKJV). They will discover the wisdom of the psalmist: "I will lift up my eyes to

the mountains; from where shall my help come? My help comes from the LORD, Who made heaven and earth" (Psalm 121:1-2 NASB).

Take Time to Exercise

Motivation, commitment, determination, discipline and dedication are important elements for a successful fitness program. Taking proper care of your miraculous body, the temple of the Holy Spirit, will provide numerous health benefits such as having more energy, feeling and looking better, being less prone to injury, dealing with stress more effectively and having a better, more confident attitude.

Your goal should not just be to get in shape, but to maintain the best condition possible by making health and fitness a lifetime commitment. From the age of 12 (1965), when I was in the seventh grade, I have been involved in some type of exercise regimen (except for the brief period previously mentioned). I have trained numerous individuals, taught exercise classes at a Bible college, YMCA, Jesus '84, National Senior Health and Fitness Day, churches, schools, camps and other venues in the U.S. and overseas, as well as speaking and writing on biblical principles of health and fitness.

Alongside my total fitness and self-defense classes, Karen sometimes led aerobics for women and teen girls in another section of our former ministry center. Through the witness in these classes, many came to know the ultimate answer for total health and fitness —Jesus Christ.

God blessed me with the creativity to devise a variety of workout routines, develop a unique style of self-defense training, initiate a specialized form of trampoline basketball, design innovative obstacle courses, invent recreational games (published in youth magazines) and create fasting regimens.

My current fitness routine often begins about 5:30 a.m., and after Bible study and prayer, I workout 30 to 60 minutes, four to six days a week. The various methods I have designed include stretching, flexibility, balance, strengthening and cardiovascular exercises. Throughout the week I will implement a variety of fitness routines

using natural resistance, weights, dumbbells, battle rope, rings or obstacle course, as well as incorporating bouncing on a rebounder, punching speed bags, kicking heavy bags, doing push-ups with grandchildren on my back, jumping rope, walking, swimming or participating in various recreational sports. I also get exercise from outside work at the ministry center as well as pushing grandchildren around in wheelbarrows or pulling them in wagons on "adventures" through "secret" trails in nearby fields and woods.

Sometimes I think I do not have time to workout, but I remind myself that I do not have time *not* to exercise. It always seems to increase my energy to accomplish more throughout the day. The physical, mental, emotional and even spiritual benefits make these few hours per week a wise and necessary investment. The older I get the more I appreciate having taken care of my health through exercise and good nutrition.

Are You Leaving Me?

A woman was overcome by fear that her husband was losing interest in her and may soon leave. I advised her to make some important and practical changes in her life to preserve her sanity, restore her health and hopefully save her marriage. Since she was overweight and had ignored taking care of her health, I suggested she replace her sugar-
laden diet with nutritious food and supplements, as well as begin an exercise regimen of walking to help deal with the emotional stress. I recommended she modify her attitude and perspective from negativism and pessimism to being more positive and confident. Finally, I encouraged her to spend time each day in the Bible so the Holy Spirit could make known her tremendous value as a child of God, give her inner peace and transform her life.

Several weeks later, without knowing that his wife had previously called me, the husband came to see me. He was worried that all the changes his wife was making in her life were an indication that she was preparing to leave him. After he, too, accepted some biblical counsel, their lives "balanced out" and their marriage was

restored. They remained married and in love, serving together in ministry and missions for several years until he went to be with the Lord.

You Have a Choice

After observing people at a breakfast buffet at a large hotel in Las Vegas, Dr. Don Colbert shares the following interesting account in his book, *What Would Jesus Eat?:*

> [T]he typical person who ate from the high-sugar, high-fat table tended to be overweight, with more puffiness around the face and eyes, and generally stooped shoulders and a more sallow complexion. These people tended to appear more tired, with a lower general energy level.
>
> On the other hand, the people who chose food from the table with fruits, whole grains, seeds, nuts, and yogurt seemed to be thinner and more energetic, had better complexions and posture, and seemed all around healthier in appearance.
>
> That was an eye-opening experience for my wife. From that day on, she began to eat more fruits, vegetables, whole grains, seeds, and nuts. We drastically reduced our intake of fast food, junk food, and highly processed foods. We not only improved our physical appearance, but our energy levels also soared. By choosing to eat the foods that Jesus ate, we turned our diet of empty, useless, and often disease-aiding calories into calories full of health-promoting vitamins, phytonutrients, antioxidants, minerals, fatty acids, and enzymes.
>
> One of the first steps towards health is to junk the junk. In other words, remove foods containing chemical colorings, preservatives, pesticides, refined sugars, unhealthy fats, as well as sausages, meats, and poultry laced with chemicals, hormones, and antibiotics from your diet.

Since the psalmist declared, "I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Your works are wonderful, I know that full well" (Psalm 139:14), why are so many Christians sick and not walking in health? In many cases it is because we violate biblical principles: we lack self-control; have poor health habits; neglect proper exercise and sleep; have unresolved stress issues; overwork or are lazy; expose ourselves to dangerous chemicals, pollutants or too much sun. We allow negative emotions such as jealousy, anger and bitterness to dominate our lives.

Time is the great equalizer; one day you will pay for your poor choices. Just remember, the farther you walk down the road of bad health habits, the longer the walk back towards better health. An unknown author stated, "A man whose only goal in life is to seek riches will spend all his waking time finding ways to get more wealth, while neglecting his health. Then later in life he will spend all his wealth to try to gain back his health." Dr. Stan Harris said, "If you ignore your health, it will go away."

I have cautioned many people who abused themselves with over-consumption of junk food and other unhealthy practices by stating: "You can willingly change your diet and lifestyle now, or one day you will be forced to." Most smiled and said, "No problem. It is not hurting me." Often within a few years—sometimes months—these people were forced to change their diets and lifestyles because of health issues. For some it was too late, and contributed to an untimely death.

Injuries and poor health choices are cumulative—the longer you live the more injuries and pain you accumulate. If I knew I was going to live as long as I have already, I would have made better choices as a youth (when my friends and I did not expect to live past age 25). By the age of 30 I had depleted my health. It was a long road back—taking years to reverse the consequences of an unhealthy lifestyle—but well worth the effort.

When our amazing "machine" malfunctions after years of abuse, we wonder: "Why has God allowed this sickness or disease to come upon me?" We often resort to quick prayers for healing. If healing

does not occur, some turn to New Age and occult healing techniques or use drugs and alcohol to mask the pain.

Sometimes, we do not get healed because God wants to deal with the root cause—not merely the symptoms. The real problem is usually a lack of discipline and self-control and a disregard of biblical health principles.

Since we are this wonderful creation of God as the psalmist said (Psalm 139:14), how can we walk in greater health until the final redemption of our physical bodies? Before I share some steps to optimum health, let me briefly mention that Romans chapter 14, and other scriptures, make it clear that we have the freedom to eat whatever we want without endangering our relationship with Jesus Christ or our eternal destiny. Nevertheless, wisdom, spread throughout the pages of the Bible, reveals the importance of avoiding gluttony and other destructive indulgences. The choices we make and the things we do impact the length and quality of our lives:

- What foods do you consume?
- Do you exercise or not?
- How do you handle stress?
- Are you exposed to environmental pollutants?
- What is your decision on the use of alcohol, tobacco and drugs?
- Do you engage in immoral behavior?
- Do you allow anger, bitterness, despair and feelings of hopelessness to rule your thoughts and emotions or do you choose love, forgiveness, peace and joy?

The fallout from these choices accumulate over time and determine the kind of life you will live, and even when and how you will die.

Considering the toxicity of our bodies, minds and spirits, the fact that we live in relatively good health for as long as we do is a testimony of how wonderfully we are made.

Optimum health is dependent on each person's circumstances. It is taking whatever our situation and limitations are and seeking, with God's help, to improve wherever we can. There are things beyond our control such as birth defects, unexpected accidents, violent crime and exposure to contagious diseases which leave some people to deal with irreversible injuries or genetic disabilities. However, we can still choose to trust and honor God, and seek, as far as possible, to implement biblical health principles.

Many Things Have Taken Their Toll

Although I now strive for optimal health, there are many things which have taken their toll:

- Damage from my previous junk food diet and foolish lifestyle during my younger years
- The many penicillin shots and tablets given to me as a youth
- Hearing loss from loud music as a teenager and exposure to environmental noise
- Heavy metal poisoning from lead paint and water pipes, mercury fillings and the like
- Exposure to environmental pollutants, toxic chemicals and substances (in the midst of several ministry construction projects—inhaling drywall dust, fumes from varnish, propane heaters, smoke from burning debris throughout the years)
- Radiation from hundreds of airplane flights and living by a cell phone tower for over 25 years
- Smoke and ash from living through and then serving as a chaplain during California wildfires
- Health hazards from exhaust fumes in Third World countries
- Late nights and sleep deprivation
- Injuries and traumas from gymnastics, football, fighting, martial arts, boxing, wrestling, soccer, various falls,

overtraining and just plain wild and careless living

- Ten car wrecks—a few were head-on collisions
- Severe neck whiplash from being hit from behind in several vehicle accidents—including our car being totaled by a large truck which hit us from behind twice, thrusting us into a multi-vehicle pile up
- Vision slightly blurred after head trauma from another vehicle hitting me on the driver's side and from long hours writing books and newsletters on computers
- Stress from many potential dangers, near tragedies and life threatening situations while on mission trips
- Hundreds of mosquito bites in Haiti, India, Nigeria ... as well as close contact with people having leprosy, tuberculosis and other contagious diseases
- Stomach hernia from moving heavy rocks at the ministry center
- The natural stresses from having my mother and several temporary foster children living with us, and other family members staying with us for extended periods of time (mother-in-law and father-in-law ...)
- Participating in or attending a diversity of activities and sports with two active children and eleven energetic grandchildren—although requiring much time and energy, they were (and are) an oasis providing me a break from endless hours of work
- My wife's many health crises, injuries and surgeries
- Tooth abscess, brown recluse spider bite and stings by swarms of yellow jackets—extremely dangerous and potentially life threatening but taken care of through self-treatment
- Pressure of starting and maintaining a growing ministry with continual deadlines (newsletters, books, radio broadcasts, speaking engagements, website...); overseeing many staff and volunteers and financial needs

- Frequent fasting often weakened me physically but rebuilt me stronger spiritually
- Crisis intervention for hundreds of people and families—sometimes in the middle of the night
- Concern for the spiritual well-being, health and financial needs of missionaries, pastors and people worldwide
- Spiritual warfare from being on the front lines of ministry

In spite of it all, I am in better shape and live a healthier life than most people my age. Regardless of all the things that attempt to rob my health, the Lord promised He would restore my youth like the eagles (Psalm 103:5). He has certainly done so as I have sought to obey His Word and glorify Him with every aspect of my life.

I also realize that I am in a fallen, deteriorating body. The constant "giving of my body" for the sake of the Gospel takes its toll. Paul states in 2 Corinthians 4:16, "Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day."

Steps To Optimum Health

On my "Steps To Optimum Health" poster, I list the following ideas as reminders to live a wise, balanced and healthy life. Hopefully, they will encourage you to obtain greater health—physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually—through biblical principles:

- Develop a personal and vibrant relationship with the Creator
- Start and end each day with prayer, praise, Bible study and meditation (reflection) on God's Word
- Seek to honor the Lord in all things
- Watch and read that which is profitable—avoid what is unprofitable

- Have a positive mental attitude—faith, hope, courage, confidence ...
- Cultivate the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control
- Eat healthy: replace unhealthy snacks and junk food with nutritious (organic when possible) fresh fruit and vegetables, whole grains, legumes, raw nuts and seeds, lean protein, healthful fats and plenty of leafy greens
- Do not overeat; chew food thoroughly to aid digestion, assimilation and elimination
- Drink adequate amounts of pure water and vegetable juices
- Fast occasionally
- Avoid either extreme of compulsive overworking or persistent laziness
- Exercise regularly—get your body moving
- Protect your skin—enjoy being outdoors getting exercise (walking, yard work ...) but limit sun exposure
- Remove harmful pollutants and toxic chemicals from your home and workplace
- Abstain from alcohol, drugs and needless medications
- Use wisdom to prevent careless accidents and injuries
- Laugh, whistle, hum and sing to calm and revitalize
- Sleep seven to nine hours nightly and get adequate relaxation (in a hammock ...)
- Rest one day a week from work to rejuvenate your body, mind and spirit

Greater Health through Biblical Principles

From personal experience and studying health and fitness for decades, I am convinced that Scripture contains superior principles for obtaining maximal physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health. The pages of our Bible divulge the ultimate way to gain

health in this life, as well as to obtain eternal life! As believers in Christ, we await the blessed hope of the transformation of our physical bodies at the Lord's return (Romans 8:18-25; 1 Corinthians 15:35-57; Philippians 3:20-21).

Do not settle for imitation or inferior health and healing techniques which could compromise your biblical convictions or seduce you from a pure devotion to Christ. Instead, walk in harmony with, and in obedience to, God's natural health laws and biblical principles. You will achieve your inherent optimal health, living a better quality of life with increased energy to accomplish His will and be a more effective witness for Jesus Christ! When the world sees how your faith in Christ positively affects every dimension of your life, many will want to know the Christ you represent.

Remember, "Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31). As stewards of the amazing bodies, minds and spirits God has given us, we are responsible to establish balance by seeking to be physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually fit!

Self-Control—the Essence of Strength

From traveling and ministering throughout the U.S. and abroad, and receiving thousands of letters from around the world, I have discovered that one of the biggest problems youth and adults face is the lack of discipline and self-control. Almost all the problems people have and the trouble they get into—whether the result of drugs and alcohol; sexual immorality or lust leading to broken relationships, unwanted pregnancies and STDs; overeating, stealing, lying or gossiping; jealousy, bitterness, revenge, outbursts of anger or acts of violence—all could have been avoided had they exercised discipline and self-control.

As previously stated when I started this ministry, the Lord spoke to my heart that He would greatly use and bless me if I remained faithful. He warned that sin, especially sexual immorality or pride, would destroy my life and ministry should I let either one get a foothold. Therefore, when I spend time in prayer and fasting, I ask the Lord to not allow me to tolerate—and to keep me from—disobedience and immorality. I pray that by His Spirit, He will enable me to walk in obedience, control and discipline, and to desire Him more than anything or anyone else; to have a hunger and thirst and passion for Him.

Out of Control

Before coming to Christ, I was out of control in virtually every area of my life. I could not control my stealing. I would walk into a store and walk out with almost anything I wanted. I stole so much it became second nature. I would steal without hesitation and sometimes without even realizing I was doing it. Even as a

Christian, when I was in a store or situation similar to something I was in before I was a Christian, my mind would flash back, and I would still feel guilty and strange, as if I were being watched because the clerk thought I was trying to steal something. I would go out of my way to keep my hands out of my pockets so they would know I was *not* trying to steal anything.

Eating was another area in which I was out of control. As a kid I was a junk food addict! I would steal money from my dad and oldest brother to buy candy and all kinds of junk food. I craved chocolate, sugar, salt and greasy foods. One time I stole $20 (that was a large sum of money when I was about 7 or 8) from my oldest brother and took a neighbor girl to a nearby convenience store. I bought us milkshakes, candy bars and other items. When I paid with a $20 bill, they called my house. My oldest brother came to get me, and smacked me all the way home for stealing from him.

When my friends and I became teens, we frequently slept out under the stars. We would load up on junk food to eat throughout the night. Usually I would buy a couple quarts of soda pop or a half gallon of chocolate milk, along with cupcakes, donuts, candy bars and potato chips. My friend's girlfriend worked at a candy store and on Sunday afternoons she would be working alone, so we came in and ate anything we wanted, taking bags of candy home. As a result, I had several teeth pulled and many fillings due to all the sugar-laden foods I had consumed.

Drinking was also a problem for me. I could not control my use of alcohol— I *lived* to get high on weekends and holidays. One night I got so drunk I almost fell through a large storefront window in my hometown. On many occasions I was in car wrecks due to the influence of alcohol, barely avoiding tragedy.

I loved gambling so much that it had begun to control me. For weeks at a time my friends and I would go on gambling sprees, during which all our free time would revolve around gambling. We would play cards all night and even developed an intricate cheating system by using our eyes. This system won us lots of money, but eventually it almost got us "killed." Once at a local bazaar, I

convinced the dealer in a poker booth to give me extra cards with the promise of splitting the profits with him afterwards. He did so, but I took off and never gave him anything.

My mouth was also out of control; always getting me into trouble. I could not restrain my lying lips. I lied *so well*, I convinced myself. When I was not lying, my big mouth was popping off to someone. Often, older guys waited for me after school, came to my house, were looking for me or sending someone else after me, because of something offensive I'd said to them, or something obnoxious I said to their girlfriends.

Controlled by lust, I compulsively looked for constant excitement and pleasure. Consequences were of little concern—at least until they caught up with me! A true hedonist, I used and abused many people.

Addicted to adrenaline, I would try every thrill imaginable to experience a temporary high, like the time I sped down the highway at 115 miles per hour in my dad's convertible thinking I was invincible and that if I hit something I would not be killed. The fastest I ever went was 135 miles per hour in my friend's Mustang. I loved the sensation of speed and thrived on jumping trains and bumper-dragging cars in the snow. I jumped off train trestles into the waters of the dam even though I was afraid of heights; I forced myself to do it because of peer pressure and a desire for yet another thrill. "Funterocious" is a word I invented for doing something fun while being terrified or scared. Adventurous activities were a passion for me.

My cheating was uncontrollable. I cheated and charmed my way through much of high school, and thought I was getting away with it. Answers would be written up and down my arms, hidden under my desk, on my belt and in my socks. I would sweet-talk girls to do assignments for me, and pay or threaten guys to do them. Guess what? The only one I cheated was myself!

I expected to spend my life lifting weights and relaxing on some secluded island beach somewhere reclining in a hammock tied between two palm trees. You could not have convinced me back

then that God would one day change my life and call me into the ministry, that I would go to Bible college and that I would need to apply what was being taught in my high school classes: English to write books, science and history for the research I would do, Geography for traveling the world to minister, math and algebra to understand finances, languages for missionary outreaches to foreign lands. At school, the only areas in which I really applied myself were physical education (gym class) and lunch.

At Bible college I had to spend time looking up words for spelling and meanings. It was more difficult for me than most of the other students because I had to learn what I'd missed in high school, as well as keep up with the information the Bible college instructors were teaching us. This additional burden was the direct result of wasted high school years when I thought I was getting away with cheating! However, it did force me to discipline myself and study hard, for which I have been rewarded in many ways.

An additional serious out-of-control problem was in the area of finances. When my wife and I ran away and got married as teenagers, although we were poor, we followed the traditional American lifestyle of credit cards and bank loans. Before long we were way over our heads in debt.

After attending an Abundant Life seminar at Bible college, the Lord dealt with us, and we got rid of our credit cards and refused to borrow money for which we must pay interest. Eventually we got more credit cards, but we paid them off each month so as not to incur any interest. We have consistently applied the lessons we learned regarding finances to both our personal lives and ministry. That is one reason why our ministry has operated so effectively and why we live better on limited funds and have less stress than most people who have much more money, but are in debt.

Considering all the above, I know what it means to be out of control. If God could bring my life under control, He can bring *anyone's* life under control.

Scars Remain

There is another aspect to being out of control, and that is paying the consequences of wrong choices. As a result of my foolish, rebellious, out-of-control behavior, I have paid the price with injuries from head to toe because I (or someone near me) was out of control. (Remember my list of past injuries in the previous chapter.)

James Clear correctly stated, "It is only when looking back two, five, or perhaps ten years later that the value of good habits and the cost of bad ones become strikingly apparent."

Once I was speaking, running an exercise clinic and giving a self-defense demonstration at a youth camp. When I finished, a big burly guy in his thirties came over to me, moving slowly. He told me he had a bad back and arthritis in his hands. I said, "I bet you loved to fight and busted many heads when you were young." He asked, "How do you know?" I replied, "Because I recognize the consequences that occur because of that kind of lifestyle. I know the arthritis in your hands is from busting heads, and the bad back is a result of getting slammed to the ground."

The Bible says in Galatians 6:7-8:

> Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.

I am a good illustration of this, for I am suffering many consequences from the foolish things I did before committing my life to Christ. I not only work to reverse some of the consequences of my former out-of-control lifestyle through healthy living, but I also let people know that the Bible is true—you do reap what you sow.

Ecclesiastes 11:9 and 12:1 caution us concerning how we live during our youth:

> Be happy, young man, while you are young, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see, but know that for all these things God will bring you to judgment. Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, "I find no pleasure in them."

Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 wisely concludes:

> Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.

You are free to make almost any choice you want; you can involve yourself in any kind of behavior you desire, but it is like being on a high roof, you can jump off if you want. You are free to make that decision. Once you jump off, however, you are no longer free. You are now a slave to the law of gravity which will splatter you on the ground below.

While you do have the freedom to get involved in drugs, alcohol, sexual immorality, gambling, stealing, lying, fighting, vandalism, gossiping, gluttony or any other destructive behavior, the consequences will one day catch up to you. I have seen it one hundred percent of the time. Maybe not overnight, but eventually you will reap what you sow. Use wisdom, therefore, deciding in what to participate and concerning the lifestyle you choose to live.

God will forgive, but the scars and consequences often remain. Consider for example, if a drunken driver kills a little child, God will forgive him if he sincerely asks, but he will live with that memory for the rest of his life, and so will that child's family. Adverse consequences and life-time memories are why it is so important to develop self-control now!

Weakness Defined

Proverbs 25:28 states:

> Like a city whose walls are broken down is a man who lacks self-control.

In biblical days cities often had walls built around them which made them strong and easy to defend fortresses. But if the walls were broken down, the inhabitants were vulnerable and defenseless against an enemy's attack. So God is saying, "If you have self-control, it's like having a wall around the city—you are strong. However, a person without self-control is weak, defenseless and vulnerable."

Alexander the Great was a powerful man who conquered and then controlled most of the known world. His empire extended from Greece to India. But he could not conquer his lusts. He died at age 33 after taking ill following a prolonged banquet and drinking bout. Is that real control? Is that strength? Is that what you want in your life?

Consider many of the rock stars, movie actors and great athletes who were so idolized. They flaunt their out-of-control behavior and rebellious lifestyles; many covet their fame, money and power. However, the outcome of their lives is often tragic. This is not what God desires for you.

Proverbs 16:32 (NASB) says:

> He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit, than he who captures a city.

You can go out and conquer a city—even conquer the world—but if you cannot tame your spirit, you have not achieved the strength that God wants you to have. Controlling your own spirit, temper, desires, thoughts and behavior is better than conquering other people or achieving great accomplishments.

I have known those who could do phenomenal, almost superhuman, feats. Yet they were unable to restrain their tongues

or their tempers. They were powerless to control their lusts, jealousy, hatred, bitterness, worry or fear. Again, not strength but weakness. Is it really that impressive, and is there any real benefit, to being able to do incredible feats while the rest of your life is out of control? Far more important than external displays is the inner molding of one's character and spirit.

The Essence of Strength

The world's view of strength is distorted and twisted. It equates strength with fighting better, consuming more alcohol, jumping from bed to bed, acting wild and crazy, robbing or vandalizing. But that is a lie! I know because I lived that lie. If you think that is strength then you have deceived yourself.

Equating strength with how much someone could bench press, how many people they could beat up or how much alcohol they could drink, I eventually realized that these are not the essence of true strength. Physical strength does not impress me now as much as inner strength. Being able to chug a six-pack of beer, bench press 400 pounds or defeat ten others at the same time is not as powerful as having self-control. Power greater than physical strength is the inner strength and control that comes through the transforming power of God's Spirit.

I have told countless people in the military, weightlifters and martial artists, gang members and prisoners that anyone can live a life out of control. I can teach a five-year-old child to fight, steal, rob, vandalize, swear, smoke, drink, do drugs and lose their temper. However, it takes courage, strength, self-control and discipline to resist peer pressure and live for Christ.

At a maximum-security prison in Florida, I spoke in a large room filled with inmates. I opened by saying: "You are not here because you are strong; you are here because you are weak. Anyone can take drugs, indulge in alcohol, beat their spouse and kids, rob, fight, vandalize, shoot someone or engage in other out of control behavior, but it takes true strength to have self-control. So, today, I want to talk about true strength." Following my message all the

men—many who were huge from lifting weights—lined up to shake my hand and said as they looked me in the face, "Thanks for telling it like it is!"

In school assemblies and detention centers I would often demonstrate (while wearing sneakers) two back kicks to illustrate the superiority of having self-control. First, I would do a kick to my assistant's chest with little or no control, driving him backward. "Anyone can do that," I would say. "It is very easy to kick without control." I did one demonstration at a high school assembly for several hundred juniors and seniors that were seated at tables in groups of eight all around the elevated stage area. My helper was a big guy who played basketball for one of the Penn State branches. When I did the "out-of-control" kick, I must have kicked him harder than he expected, and he went flying back about six feet and hit an easel. The easel flipped in the air as it flew off the stage, crashing in the middle of a table of students, and breaking apart. For the rest of that assembly not one student in the audience talked or moved, but paid close attention.

The second back kick was also at full speed, but my foot would stop within a fraction of an inch of my assistant's face, or lightly touch his nose with the bottom of my shoe. "To have control," I would explain, "requires far more strength and ability." To emphasize this point I would sometimes then do about ten to fifteen speed hand techniques within a fraction of an inch of my assistant's face. I wanted to make certain my audience never forgets the importance of self-control.

While speaking for an assembly at a predominately Jewish school in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, I randomly chose a student to assist me with the two back kicks demo. It went flawlessly and my message was enthusiastically received. The teacher who sponsored me, told me later that she was terrified when I did the full speed kick to the student's nose because his father is a lawyer, and he would have sued if I had even slightly injured his son.

Another time I was speaking on peer pressure and self-control at a youth detention center. About halfway through my message I

made the mistake of mentioning the illustration about the two back kicks—informing them I would be unable to demonstrate them tonight because I wore boots (with smooth and slippery bottoms) due to the snowy weather and had on dress pants. Interrupting my message as they collectively said, "No! We want to see it!" So I said, "Okay, who wants to volunteer?" Nobody moved. Finally, after some prompting by peers, a big guy called Samson agreed and came down front.

Suddenly over 100 youth rushed to the front, surrounding us to watch as if it were going to be a street fight! I was thinking, "Lord, what did I get myself into? If I slip and hit this guy in the chin, it could turn into a riot. If I kick too far away from his chin, to avoid slipping in these boots and hitting him, it will be so unimpressive that I will lose the impact I am having. You have got to help me." Thank the Lord, it went perfectly. I came within a fraction of an inch of his face at full speed. As a result, they all went back to their seats and listened intently, and over twenty of them came forward during the altar call.

Remember, the biblical inference of being "without self-control" means that one is without strength, weak and powerless, while the person exercising self-control is strong and powerful.

The Strongest Person

Before I became a Christian, I thought Christians were weak. That is one reason why I did not want to give my life to Jesus Christ. I later discovered it takes more strength to live for Christ than any other lifestyle out there.

Do you know who is the strongest person who ever lived? Jesus Christ. He was frequently in situations of extreme pressure and in volatile environments, but He always kept His composure (even when He was driving out the money changers). He was in control of all situations; nobody controlled Him. He let them crucify Him. Before it was His time, He walked through crowds (Luke 4:30), hid Himself and went out (John 8:59) or escaped their grasp (John 10:39); He overcame them orally (John 10:31-32), He silenced

them with His words (Luke 20:40). Nobody controlled Jesus Christ. As I read the Gospel accounts, I see that Jesus always operated from a position of love, wisdom and self-control.

As a young Christian I maintained an extensive, intensive and rigorous weightlifting and martial arts training program. I would accomplish more in three hours a week and achieve a higher level of conditioning and efficiency than most others did in ten hours. However, God diverted my course as His Word revealed to me what constitutes real strength. Although I still exercise and train on my own, the priority of my life is devoted to achieving true strength as exemplified by Jesus Christ. My desire for physical strength and power has been superseded by something far more important—inner strength, character and spiritual power.

Developing Self-Control

In the January 2022 *Turning Points* magazine Dr. David Jeremiah wrote:

> Newborns have no self-discipline at all. They cry when they want; go to the bathroom when they want; sleep when they want. We aren't born with self-control, but we are born with the capacity to learn to manage our habits and emotions.

There are countless examples in all of our lives, as well as from others throughout history, that show the adverse consequences of not having self-control, and the great benefits from having it. I could share many more illustrations, but hopefully there are enough throughout this book to motivate you to desire the tremendous benefits that having self-control (and other virtues) will bring. So how do you develop self-control? The following are some practical, yet crucial, principles concerning how you can begin to develop discipline and self-control over every aspect of your life.

Assume Responsibility

First, you must assume responsibility for your behavior. Many people like to blame their problems on their parents, their

environment, peer pressure, God or Satan. That should not be surprising, for from the beginning of human history, we have been blaming others. When God confronted Adam after he ate the forbidden fruit, Adam blamed Eve and said, "It's the woman You gave me, God." Eve said, "It's the serpent." Before the serpent could shift blame—probably to God—judgment was pronounced. So too, many Christians today attribute their out-of-control behavior to Satan or someone or something other than themselves. If we are going to change, we must assume responsibility for our own behavior and stop blaming others.

Receive Forgiveness

Many people have made mistakes while being out of control in some area of their lives; but no matter what you have done, there is hope. As Jesus said to the woman caught in adultery, "Neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin" (John 8:11). Written to believers, 1 John 1:9 states:

> If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

A man nearing the age of 70, who had squandered his life on reckless behavior, told me he had asked the Lord to forgive him many times over the years. But after repeated failures, he felt he could never be forgiven for all he had done and was doomed eternally. The Lord instantly spoke to my heart the following words: "There is no sin the Lord cannot forgive, except the sin that is not asked to be forgiven." This man who had fallen into hopeless despair for his wasted life accepted again the Lord's offer of forgiveness (1 John 1:9). A few years later he died as a powerful witness for Jesus Christ.

Be Motivated

As a new Christian I prayed many times to overcome several controlling sins from my past. However, I was continually defeated because I was not really motivated. But the Lord knows how to

motivate! He convinced me (through both Scripture and the adverse consequences myself and others were experiencing) that my former way of living led to death and destruction. That motivated me to take steps to bring my life under His control.

When I really wanted to be set free, and I truly repented before the Lord, He intervened and gave me the wisdom and strength to walk in victory. God's Spirit empowered me to obey the principles in His Word.

Overcome Bad Habits

When my son was just a child, he began to stick out his tongue while I was teaching him gymnastics, self-defense, how to hit the speed bag and so on. I repeatedly warned him by saying, "BJ, don't do that because you will develop a bad habit you cannot break." He would answer, "Come on, Dad, it's no problem." He thought it was funny so he kept doing it.

When he was a little older and playing soccer in a youth league or playing on a basketball team at school, he would sometimes have his tongue hanging out. He would be dribbling down the field or basketball court, and if he was not thinking about it, his tongue would be out. I said, "See how you developed a habit that you need to stop?" He agreed to cooperate with me in overcoming it, so every time I saw it out, I kept saying, "BJ, get it in." Finally after months of reminding him, he overcame that bad habit.

Likewise, many of us have developed harmful habits and patterns in our lives that, like ruts from wagon wheels, need to be acknowledged and persistently corrected in order to overcome.

Flee Youthful Lusts

Follow the Apostle Paul's advice to Timothy to flee youthful lusts and evil desires and pursue righteousness (2 Timothy 2:22). Avoid people, places, internet sites, movies, music, magazines and so on that draw you to sin. Stop and consider the consequences before temptation gets out of control. Rely on God's Spirit to help you resist and to run if necessary.

I have given many self-defense clinics in schools and for other groups where I demonstrated how to avoid potential confrontations and how to deal with attack situations. "The most important principle," I would say, "is to use wisdom in avoiding places, people and situations in which you know a confrontation or an attack is likely to occur." Similarly, to overcome temptation for which you have a weakness, avoid places, people and situations that would entice you into sin and into compromising circumstances. First Thessalonians 5:22 (NASB) wisely admonishes us to "abstain from every form of evil".

As a new Christian I used to think, "Lord, I am going to put myself right in the middle of every temptation so I can prove how powerful You are in enabling me to overcome it." I wondered why I was often defeated. The Lord made me mindful of the children of Israel entering and conquering the Promised Land. God told them to destroy all the idols and high places so they would not be tempted to follow the religious practices of the nations they dispossessed (Exodus 34:13; Deuteronomy 7:5).

At first I thought this was cruel. I thought it revealed a weakness in Him—that He was unable to preserve His people in the midst of temptation. However, the Lord knows the attraction and draw of sin. He gives us wisdom to avoid temptations before they ensnare, enslave and devastate us—just as they did to Israel on numerous occasions when they violated God's commands.

One Area Affects All

One reason I fast, exercise, eat nutritiously and limit my viewing of movies and programs to that which is profitable is to help me develop self-control. I have learned that being disciplined in these areas makes it much easier for me to stay disciplined in other areas of my life as well. When I begin to let even one area of my life get out of control, it seems—before I know it—that other areas also become undisciplined, like a domino effect.

Mental Discipline

If you want to change your behavior, you have to change your thought life. Mental discipline is crucial. If you want to control your words and actions, learn to control your thoughts and attitudes.

Coaches tell players, "You give up first in your mind; then your body quits." When I was totally exhausted from working out on the trampoline, my gymnastic instructor would say, "You are not really tired. You can keep going. It is all in your head." And I would think, "That is easy for you to say. I cannot continue; I am going to die." Then some girls would walk into the gym, and I would quickly revive! He was right; it was all in my mind.

For many years I was involved in gymnastics at the Buhl Club. I continually did back flips on the trampoline and floormats and practiced in various neighborhood yards and on sandy beaches. The Buhl Club would have an annual Super Circus. One of the performances I did was inherited from my second oldest brother and was the grand finale: I would be on the Nissen trampoline with a blue cloth bag over my head—which came down to my knees—while guys on opposite corners of the trampoline twirled a long rope in circles around me as I did multiple back flips through it—about 20-25 in a row.

As a young teenager, I did so many back flips during my gymnastics career that something must have short-circuited in my brain. I would get on a trampoline, and instead of bouncing three times to get my height before doing back flips, after only one bounce (and sometimes before I could even bounce), without thinking, I would do a back flip. I would occasionally end up in the springs or on the floor. It got so bad that sometimes I would be walking along in my yard and all of a sudden I would do a back flip or a back handspring. I could not overcome that, and for a long time it controlled me. For several years, before I became a Christian, I was afraid to get back on a trampoline.

Then I gave my life to Christ and was called into the ministry. A local high school donated a Nissen trampoline to our ministry. Fifteen years had gone by, but that vivid memory returned. As I got

on that trampoline I said, "God, Your Word says, 'I can do all things through Him who strengthens me'" (Philippians 4:13). I began to bounce slowly as I quoted that scripture in my mind and told myself I could do it, refusing to be controlled by that fear.

I was soon able to do some of my old tricks again, train others and play trampoline basketball (which requires a lot of high bouncing). I still had to be careful and keep my mind focused, but I never had a problem during the hundreds of times since then that I have been on trampolines. I was able to overcome this controlling fear by trusting the Lord and developing mental discipline.

Thoughts and Temptations

Everyone has tempting thoughts and desires, but you can control what you do with them. Your thoughts and temptations are not sin, unless you dwell on them or give in to them. What you do with those thoughts and with those temptations determines whether it is merely a temptation or actual sin.

In Matthew 15:19, Jesus reveals that sin begins in the heart. He states: "For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander." If we are going to overcome the temptations we face daily, we must effectively eradicate the preliminary thoughts before they can control and enslave us.

What you program into your mind will eventually manifest in your thoughts, attitudes, words and behavior. Your thoughts lead to attitudes. Your thoughts and attitudes produce an emotional response. Your thoughts, attitudes and emotions lead to actions. Your actions lead to habits and patterns. Your habits and patterns lead to a lifestyle. Your lifestyle determines your destiny!

That is why God puts *so* much emphasis on the heart and the inward man. He knows that if you are going to gain victory over your behavior and actions, you *must* control your thoughts, attitudes and emotions.

If you fill your mind with jealousy, you will eventually end up in bitterness and gossiping. If you fill your mind with hatred and

revenge, you will end up verbally, and possibly physically, abusing people. If you fill your mind with lustful thoughts and sexually explicit movies, books and music, your involvement in sexual immorality is inevitable.

You may say, "My thoughts and attitudes do not affect me." Suppose a bear would come charging right at you. Because of the emotion of fear, numerous changes would occur immediately within your body: your pulse rate would increase; your breathing would become more rapid; adrenaline would flood your bloodstream; your pupils would dilate, enabling you to see better; your hearing would become more acute; your muscles would tense; your blood pressure would rise.

All this and more would occur as your body prepares to defend itself or to run away. It is known as the fight-or-flight syndrome which occurs instantaneously when we encounter real or imaginary danger. Some people are actually frozen in fear. Even if it really was not a bear, and you only thought it was, your emotional response of fear would still automatically cause these physical reactions.

The psyche or mind can produce varied effects in the body or soma; thus the term, psychosomatic. Our emotions and our thoughts can affect our behavior and our lifestyle.

If you fill your body with junk food, you will eventually develop a junky body. If you fill your mind with garbage, you will eventually develop a garbage thought life, mental attitude and lifestyle. It is inevitable; it's just a matter of time. What we watch, read and listen to does affect us.

I well remember how music affected my friends and me as teenagers. We used to start fights and act wild and crazy when we heard certain songs. I wrecked several cars because a particular song on the radio motivated me to drive even faster and more recklessly than usual. I hitchhiked across the country, mainly because two popular songs of that time made it sound so exciting. I later discovered why the main rock group I liked had influenced me so much toward fighting and rebellious behavior: their lifestyles and songs had demonic connotations.

It is not surprising that so many people have lustful thoughts and sexual problems! No wonder so many cannot control their tongues, tempers or appetites, or are controlled by worry, fear, jealousy, bitterness and hatred! Just consider the degenerate materials that program their minds and the voices they are listening to.

Resist and Submit

The Lord has taught me that I must not tolerate certain thoughts. Thoughts of worry, fear, jealousy, bitterness, anger, revenge, pride, lust or greed that come into my mind are intruders that will destroy me if allowed to remain. God tells us to "Resist them!" Fight against them as though you were fighting against an intruder in your house who was attempting to rape and murder your family. In such a situation I am sure you would stand and fight and endure until every ounce of strength was gone.

You must say, "I will not tolerate these negative and destructive thoughts. I choose right now by an act of my will to resist them. I choose to trust You Lord, to display courage, to show love and forgiveness, to walk in meekness and discipline and to be generous."

Remember, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy" (John 10:10). The solution to the onslaughts and temptations of the enemy is to "Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and He will come near to you" (James 4:7-8).

We must tenaciously say, "No!" to our temptations. Titus 2:11-13 states:

> For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.

We also must develop mental discipline as the following scriptures suggest.

Second Corinthians 10:5 encourages us:

> We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

Romans 12:2 instructs us:

> Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—His good, pleasing and perfect will.

Psalm 119:9, 11 asks, and then answers a relevant question:

> How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to Your word. I have hidden Your word in my heart that I might not sin against You.

Philippians 4:8 tells us:

> Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.

Most Christians think all they have to do is avoid watching, reading or listening to that which is bad for them. While Scripture tells us to avoid things that are unprofitable, it also admonishes us to *replace* them with that which is beneficial. We should watch, read, listen to, and associate with that which will be positive influences in our lives and inspire us to conform to the likeness of Jesus Christ (Romans 8:29).

Live by the Spirit

We have freedom in Christ. However, if something controls you, you no longer have liberty, but enslavement. God wants you free.

The choice is yours: Will you be controlled by the lusts of the flesh that eventually lead to destruction, death and separation from God, or will you be transformed by the Spirit of Christ, the fruit of which leads to tremendous victory, blessing, peace and joy?

Galatians 5:16-25 states:

> So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance [patience], kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with [walk in] the Spirit.

Galatians 5:22-23 reveals that self-control is a fruit of the Spirit, not of will power. If you try to develop self-control merely with your own strength and self-effort, you will be continually frustrated. You need God's Spirit to help bring your life under control. He will enable you to apply the biblical principles necessary for developing self-control.

I tried to quit stealing and lying. I tried to stop drinking. I tried to live by the Ten Commandments. Nevertheless, I was continually

defeated; I was out of control. Although I managed for a few days or a few weeks at a time, it did not last.

When I surrendered my life to Christ, He radically changed me. As I sought the Lord with all my heart, and through the study of His Word, prayer and fasting, His Spirit transformed and empowered me—enabling me to develop the fruit of self-control.

John Bunyan wisely said, "Prayer will make a man cease from sin, or sin will entice a man to cease from prayer."

The closer we draw to the Lord, the more we will be conformed to His likeness. The more we are conformed to His likeness, the more we will manifest the fruit of His Spirit and walk in victory over that which formerly controlled us.

Nothing but the Lord

The Apostle Paul said in 1 Corinthians 6:12 (NASB):

> All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable [beneficial]. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered [controlled] by anything.

The Apostle Peter reminds us that by what a person is overcome, by this they are enslaved (2 Peter 2:19). I do not know about you, but I do not want to be controlled or mastered by my temper or my tongue. I do not want to be conquered by lust, greed or fear. I do not want to be enslaved to destructive behavior such as immorality, stealing, drugs or alcohol. I do not want to be victimized by peer pressure. I do not want to be dominated by sinful thoughts, attitudes, emotions or actions. I only want to be controlled by my Lord. I want to bring every area of my life under His control and walk in His wisdom, strength and power.

It Takes Time

People often say to me, "Bill, I want you to pray for me. I need self-control from God and I need it now!" I wish I could lay hands on you and zap you so that all your problems are removed and you have immediate victory over every area of your life, but that is not

the way it usually works. Although my life was dramatically changed when I accepted Jesus Christ, it took time to develop the self-control I have gained from walking with the Lord and growing in my relationship with Him.

Many years ago my youngest brother and I were playing catch with a football in our front yard when he was still a teen. He had his shirt off and was trying to impress those walking or driving by. He would throw the football as hard as he could then glance to see if anyone was watching him. After a while I suggested, "Let's throw with the opposite hand." This time he was looking around to make sure no one was watching! Guess what, as we kept on throwing over and over, we eventually got really good at it.

It takes time to develop self-control and the discipline to overcome old habits and patterns. But if you persistently apply the principles I have been sharing, you will reap some fantastic benefits and God will bless you. Self-control is developed gradually the way fruit grows and ripens on a tree. After giving my life to Christ, I did not wake up the next day with the ability to control my temper or my thoughts and desires. It took time and effort. Spending time throughout the years in prayer and fasting and applying the truth and principles in God's Word has been life transforming and worth it all.

Equally important to the gifts of the Spirit are the fruit of the Spirit. Although the fruit of discipline and self-control may be one of the hardest to develop, it is also one of the most beneficial and rewarding. Too often we only want to deal with the symptom, but God wants to deal with the root cause. Suppose there is a spider's web in the corner of your ceiling, and you sweep it down. Why is it that the next day it is back again? Because you did not deal with the real problem: the problem is not the spider's web; the problem is the spider. Get rid of the spider and the web will not come back.

What is needed more than instant deliverance, or an easy technique or formula that deals only with the symptoms is a consistent life of discipline and self-control. As one who was totally out of control, I am telling you that if God can change me and bring

my life under control and give me the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual discipline and victory that He has, He can do it for anybody.

Never forget, the essence of true strength, is self-control—being under His control!

Dare to Be Different

Age of Conformity

We are living in an age of compromise and conformity where almost anything goes. Many Christians seem to be no different from the world in this respect. They are compromising beliefs and conforming behaviors to reflect current trends and opinions in our culture because everyone else is doing it or believing it. This desire for acceptance and belonging compels them to concede and comply.

Nevertheless, when others want us to do something that would cause us to violate our convictions, compromise our commitment to Christ, cooperate with that which dishonors and displeases our Lord or conform us to behavior that is contrary to God's Word and the leading of His Spirit, we must dare to be different!

Jesus had the boldness to go against centuries of tradition so that the truth of God's Word might be seen and obeyed. He constantly showed love to those normally despised. In John 4, for example, He spoke publicly to a woman which was not considered acceptable. To make matters worse, she was a despised Samaritan.

Pharisees recoiled from prostitutes, yet Jesus ministered to them and forgave them. Pharisees threw stones at untouchable lepers to make them keep their distance, but Jesus touched and healed lepers. In these and other ways Jesus refused to conform; whenever tradition went contrary to God's Word, Jesus honored God's Word.

Focus on the Lord

A few years after a noted evangelist had a part in leading me to Christ, he left his family and ran away with his secretary. He fell into alcoholism and financial ruin. If I had built my Christian life on him

instead of on Jesus Christ, the Solid Rock, I too may have fallen away. I learned as a young Christian to pattern my life after the Lord; to keep my focus on Him and not on people—no matter their popularity.

It does not matter how noble someone may be, if we fix our eyes on that person instead of the Lord, he or she will eventually fail us. When we keep our eyes on the Lord, we will not be disappointed in our Christian walk when someone we respect fails in theirs.

Do not follow any spiritual leader who does not set a Christlike example. The Apostle Paul said to be imitators of him, just as he also was of Christ—"Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1). Philippians 3:17 says, "Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you." Philippians 4:9 states, "Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you."

Like No One Else

God has taught me not to model myself or my ministry after another. Yes, I gain insight and inspiration from the example of others and learn from their mistakes. Nevertheless, God is the One who has instilled within me, through His Word and Spirit, His purpose and specific goals for my life and ministry.

As a new Christian, I tried to be like those I greatly respected; to talk and act like them. I soon realized that God wanted to develop my own unique style of ministry. I had become so caught up in reading their books and using their ideas that I had little time for God's Book or for prayer. However, when I began earnestly to seek the Lord's will and study Scripture, God's Spirit gave me so many ideas for ministry and illustrations for messages from my walk and adventures with Him that I cannot possibly share them all! He began to use my life and ministry in ways I never dreamed possible.

Do not be jealous or envious of what God is doing through someone else or through another church or ministry. If the Jesus of

the Bible is being exalted and His Kingdom is being advanced, then rejoice! God has made you unique in your physical appearance; no two people have even the same fingerprints. God has also given you special talents, gifts and abilities; instead of comparing yourself to others, use what He has given you for His glory. Focus on fulfilling the unique calling and purpose He has for you!

Jealousy

A man who volunteered for our ministry attempted to covertly duplicate the exact plans for a new ministry center we were building. He secretly tried to sway businesses and individuals committed to our project to support his instead. All his plans, a copy of virtually every aspect of my ministry, came to nothing—yet his scheming continued. Occasionally (like King Saul) he would feel remorse, come into my office at the new ministry center, get on his knees and cry in repentance. But within a short time he was at it again.

His jealousy and obsession eventually led to an all-out effort to destroy me and the ministry by teaming up with a well-known occultist in our area. However, God protected us and enabled me to touch this occultist's life with the Gospel—just months before he unexpectedly died. Within a few years the young man who had attempted to undermine and steal the ministry died in his 30s of Lou Gehrig's disease (ALS - Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis). I hope he truly repented before the Lord. The point is, this man had great potential but he chose to steal another person's vision rather than allow God to use him in his own unique and special way.

Copycat Ministries

It seems that most people start ministries in one of two ways: they look around at what proves successful for other ministries and then try to copy it, or they get on their knees and use God's Word to earnestly seek the Lord's will for the specific ministry He has for them to fill a special need in the body of Christ.

Christians who are clones of others never realize the unique purpose and potential God has for them. Pastors who get their messages off the internet or from others lack the passion and anointing of those who get their messages from God's Word and Spirit. Ministries that imitate and duplicate other ministries are usually superficial, lacking the conviction and intensity of those who have been genuinely called of God and are being led by His Spirit. While all ministries should be similar in the sense that they are Christ-exalting and Bible-based, God has a distinct plan for each of us in the body of Christ.

Our ministry has long endured because we sought the Lord's will rather than our own and did not let others determine what this ministry should be or do. While others rode the wave to popularity and temporary fame, this ministry continued to steadily grow. We earnestly attempted to build our ministry from day one on God's Word and the leading of His Spirit. As a result, He has sustained and blessed us beyond measure.

The Cost of Compromise

Throughout the years I have received awards and acknowledgement for various accomplishments, but I have also been denied recognition and acclaim because of one thing—my uncompromising commitment to Jesus Christ. Many opportunities—some significant—have been lost because of my refusal to compromise my convictions or conform in my behaviors.

For instance, during the early days of this ministry, I was asked to give the opening prayer for a large secular fundraising event. After accepting the invitation to pray before the start of this annual walkathon, I informed the one who asked me that I pray in Jesus' name. She said, "The previous ministers and priests never prayed in Jesus' name. I would appreciate you not doing so." I replied, "Scripture tells me that Jesus is the only mediator between God and humans
(1 Timothy 2:5) so I would be uttering an empty prayer to *not* use

His name." Although I received many compliments for my prayer, I was never invited back.

As the popularity of my ministry grew, I received invitations to speak at large Jesus festivals and other venues as well as offers to publish my books and appear on various Christian television programs. The only requirement was that I had to go along with the status quo and not speak out on controversial topics, leading to countless more doors opened to me where financial blessings would abound. My response was, "I have given up everything to follow Christ—why would I sell Him out now for temporary popularity and financial gain? I must obey God's Word and the leading of His Spirit."

Instead of following man-made traditions and not violating "sacred taboos" I developed my own style of ministry. I sometimes had to speak out or write against unscriptural teachings and practices. A love for Christ and His people compelled me to do so. This may have cost me some ministry opportunities and loss of financial support but standing for biblical truth is my only option. It has resulted in a far greater harvest of genuine fruit for the Kingdom. Sometimes we must refuse to compromise or conform, no matter whom it displeases. It is better to offend others than to offend the Lord.

Was It Worth It?

After sharing my testimony and message on *Reaching Your Maximum Potential* to an audience of tough high school students, a strong young man who had listened intently, came up to me afterwards and said: "I have one question concerning all that you have gone through and given up to follow Jesus Christ. Was it worth it?" I assured him that it most definitely was. He smiled and turned to walk away as he said, "That is all I needed to know." By the look on his face and the glimmer in his eyes I am certain he is daring to be different and making his life count!

Courage to Stand Alone

Daniel was taken captive to Babylon as a youth. He was ripped from his homeland and separated from his family and friends. In that difficult situation Daniel determined that he would honor the God of the Bible. In Daniel chapter 6, the Persians, having overthrown the Babylonians, were in control, and Daniel was much older. King Darius appointed Daniel as one of three administrators over his kingdom with 120 satraps (provincial governors in the ancient Persian empire) under them.

> Now Daniel so distinguished himself among the administrators and the satraps by his exceptional qualities that the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom. At this, the administrators and the satraps tried to find grounds for charges against Daniel in his conduct of government affairs, but they were unable to do so. They could find no corruption in him, because he was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent. Finally these men said, "We will never find any basis for charges against this man Daniel unless it has something to do with the law of his God" (Daniel 6:3-5).

Consumed with jealousy, the two administrators and satraps tricked King Darius into making a decree that anyone who prayed to any god or man other than the king during the next 30 days would be thrown into the lions' den. Daniel 6:10 says:

> Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before.

Imagine being taken captive to a distant land where everyone around you is involved in idolatry and occult practices. You are told that if you read your Bible, pray in Jesus' name or witness, you will be cast into a cage of hungry, ferocious lions. Think about the fear and emotional distress you would experience and the courage it would require for you to stand against that decree.

That was exactly the situation Daniel faced. Those who tricked King Darius into making the decree spied on Daniel knowing he would continue to faithfully pray. Yet all Daniel had to do was postpone his prayers for 30 days or at least close his windows. But he had too much integrity to close the windows and continued his regular practice of seeking God's help and courageously praying.

Crisis Oriented Relationship

There was a time before committing myself to Christ when I only wanted God's involvement in my life when I was in trouble and needed His help. Then I would get very spiritual. As a teen I would get out a Bible and lay my hands on it and say, "Oh God, if You get me out of this mess, I will change." Once the crisis passed, so did my commitment to the God of the Bible. It was superficial. I only had a "crisis oriented" relationship. When I was in a crisis, I wanted God's help. When everything was going well, I did not want Him interfering with my life.

Daniel did not have a crisis oriented relationship with God: from his youth, he prayed three times a day. Therefore, when the decree went out, Daniel did not panic; he did not fall apart and lose his composure. If you want boldness, courage, strength and power, then follow Daniel's example. Daniel consistently esteemed God throughout his life, and God honored and greatly blessed him. First Samuel 2:30 accurately says, "... Those who honor Me I will honor, but those who despise Me will be disdained."

Daniel 6:16-23 gives the following account:

> So the king gave the order, and they brought Daniel and threw him into the lions' den. The king said to Daniel, "May

> your God, whom you serve continually, rescue you!" A stone was brought and placed over the mouth of the den, and the king sealed it with his own signet ring and with the rings of his nobles, so that Daniel's situation might not be changed. Then the king returned to his palace and spent the night without eating and without any entertainment being brought to him. And he could not sleep. At the first light of dawn, the king got up and hurried to the lions' den. When he came near the den, he called to Daniel in an anguished voice, "Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to rescue you from the lions?" Daniel answered, "O king, live forever! My God sent His angel, and He shut the mouths of the lions. They have not hurt me, because I was found innocent in His sight. Nor have I ever done any wrong before you, O king." The king was overjoyed and gave orders to lift Daniel out of the den. And when Daniel was lifted from the den, no wound was found on him, because he had trusted in his God.

The men who had plotted against Daniel along with their families were thrown into the lions' den and before they reached the floor of the den the lions overpowered them and crushed all their bones (Daniel 6:24). In contrast, Daniel was delivered from the power of the lions and prospered during the reigns of Darius and of Cyrus the Persian (Daniel 6:27-28).

What an exemplary life of courage, discipline, integrity and faithfulness Daniel exhibited! May we all be inspired to do likewise.

Standing Alone

Throughout Scripture, we discover that living for God requires believers to occasionally stand alone—as did all the great biblical heroes.

Joseph was thrown into a pit by his brothers. He was all alone, rejected and sold as a slave into Egypt. In Egypt, because he honored God and spurned the affection of Potiphar's wife, he was thrown into prison. Nevertheless, Joseph continued to honor the

Lord and eventually God exalted him to the second highest position in Egypt and used him to save his family from starvation.

Moses had a chance to enjoy all the riches of Egypt for a season. Instead, he chose to be mistreated with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. As a result, he wandered in the dry and barren Midian desert. Eventually he was mightily used by God to lead Israel out of Egyptian bondage. Hebrews 11:26 says of Moses:

> He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward.

David went out alone to meet the giant Goliath. David's situation seemed hopeless, yet he was victorious because the Lord was with him. He desired to honor the God of the Bible and shut the mouth of Goliath who was mocking the Lord and intimidating the whole army of Israel. David's attitude was one of confidence and faith in the Lord:

> David said to Saul, "Let no one lose heart on account of this Philistine; your servant will go and fight him." The LORD who rescued me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will rescue me from the hand of this Philistine. David said to the Philistine, "You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied (1 Samuel 17:32, 37, 45).

David was willing to put his life on the line. He had been prepared for this feat by single-handedly killing a lion and a bear. David had all the odds against him: his opponent was bigger and stronger, his oldest brother Eliab opposed him, and even King Saul told him he would not be able to do it. His only weapon was a sling and five smooth stones, but David was courageous because he knew God was with him. As a result, he accomplished one of the most

memorable feats in Scripture, and he is remembered as one of the great heroes of the Bible.

Consider Elijah, a prophet of God, who had an encounter on Mount Carmel against hundreds of prophets of Baal. Although he was a notable minority, God honored Elijah's stand and his courage by consuming the sacrifice with supernatural fire from heaven (1 Kings 18:38).

The Apostle Paul could have become discouraged and given up when everyone forsook him (except the Lord) and he had to endure persecution alone. Nevertheless, he bravely stood for Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit (2 Timothy 4:16-18).

The church at Pergamum was commended by Christ because they did not renounce their faith in Him, even in the days of Antipas (probably the pastor of the church) who was Christ's faithful witness. According to tradition, Antipas was put to death by being burned inside a brass bull in a city identified as "where Satan lives" (Revelation 2:13).

You read about all these great Bible heroes and desire to be like them; so do I. And God speaks to my heart, "Then you will go through the same training program that I put them through if you want what I did in their lives."

The day came when each of our Bible heroes had to stand alone. God is calling you to develop your spiritual muscles, because one day you may have to stand alone for your testimony for Jesus Christ and the Word of God. Following the crowd is not always the best way to go. In Scripture the crowd is often wrong, and the one standing against popular consensus is often the one honoring the Lord. Sometimes you have to resist conforming and you might have to stand alone. However, Scripture promises that you really will not *be* alone: "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5). And besides, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31).

Courage Defined

When I played football in high school, there was a sign in the locker room which read:

> Courage is not lack of fear, but standing your ground in spite of it.

When I used to read about Bible heroes and their feats, like David against Goliath, I did not think of their hearts beating faster or their breathing rate increasing as ours do when we get into confrontations. I mistakenly thought they had no fear when they had to stand alone for the God of the Bible.

God showed me through His Word, however, that they had the same emotional responses we have. Their faith in God overcame their fear, and each one stood in spite of having a rapid heartbeat or accelerated breathing. They went out in faith and confidence and God empowered them.

General George S. Patton, Jr., stated:

> If we take the generally accepted definition of bravery as a quality which knows not fear, I have never seen a brave man. All men are frightened. The more intelligent they are, the more they are frightened. The courageous man is the man who forces himself, in spite of his fear, to carry on.

Leonard Ravenhill said:

> Great eagles fly alone; great lions hunt alone; great souls walk alone—alone with God.

I know it is convenient to compromise; to conform to be popular and liked by others. But if you really want God to use you, then you need to allow Him to infuse you with supernatural courage because you will probably have to stand alone at some point in your journey.

Old Testament Examples of Courage

King Nebuchadnezzar erected a 90-feet-high golden image (representing himself) and decreed that at the sound of musical instruments everyone was to bow down and worship it. All the leaders gathered in Babylon were prepared to do what King Nebuchadnezzar had commanded; otherwise, they would forfeit their lives.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were the only ones who refused to bow down. Nebuchadnezzar offered them a second chance to fall down and worship the image or to be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Here is what they answered the king:

> "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and He will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if He does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up!" Then Nebuchadnezzar was furious with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and his attitude toward them changed. He ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual (Daniel 3:16-19).

The king's command was so urgent and the furnace so hot that the flames of the fire killed the valiant warriors who were escorting the young Hebrew men. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace. They could have compromised and complied. They could have easily made excuses and justified bowing down, but they chose to remain standing while all the others fell down to worship the golden image.

God protected them in the fiery furnace and greatly honored them for their faith and courage. Scripture shares the following account:

> Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisers, "Weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?" They replied, "Certainly, O king." He said, "Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods." Nebuchadnezzar then approached the opening of the blazing furnace and shouted, "Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!" So Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego came out of the fire, and the satraps, prefects, governors and royal advisers crowded around them. They saw that the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them. Then Nebuchadnezzar said, "Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent His angel and rescued His servants! They trusted in Him and defied the king's command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God. Therefore I decree that the people of any nation or language who say anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego be cut into pieces and their houses be turned into piles of rubble, for no other god can save in this way." Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the province of Babylon" (Daniel 3:24-30).

Queen Esther displayed tremendous courage in revealing to the king of Persia, her husband, that she was Jewish. Her bravery, as recounted in the book of Esther, was instrumental in saving the Jewish people of the Persian Empire from being killed. To this day the Jews celebrate Purim, a joyous Jewish festival which commemorates the day Esther saved the Jewish people from a threat of national genocide.

The famous chapter on heroes of the faith, Hebrews 11, frequently uses the words "by faith" which could also easily include "with courage." Let's consider a few of them:

By faith [and with courage] Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family... (Hebrews 11:7).

By faith [and with courage] Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith [and with courage] he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God (Hebrews 11:8-10).

By faith [and with courage] Moses' parents hid him for three months after he was born, because they saw he was no ordinary child, and they were not afraid of the king's edict. By faith [and with courage] Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward. By faith [and with courage] he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; he persevered because he saw Him who is invisible. By faith [and with courage] he kept the Passover and the application of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel. By faith [and with courage] the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned (Hebrews 11:23-29).

By faith [and with courage] the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient (Hebrews 11:31).

> "And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets, who through faith [and with courage] conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. Women received back their dead, raised to life again. There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground. These were all commended for their faith [and their courage]... (Hebrews 11:32-39).

> Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us ... fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured [with great courage] the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 12:1-2).

New Testament Examples of Courage

Consider the courage of Stephen as he boldly spoke in the power of God's Spirit to the Jewish Sanhedrin even though it would cost him his life (Acts 7:51-60). Stephen's death no doubt had a later influence on Saul who had approved of his stoning:

> Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he fell

> on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep. And Saul approved of their killing him. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria (Acts 7:58–8:1).

On the road to Damascus with persecution on his mind, Saul had a dramatic conversion (Acts 9:1-9). Saul was also known as Paul (Acts 13:9) and later as the Apostle Paul. On one of his missionary journeys to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Paul, accompanied by Barnabas, healed a crippled man in Lystra (Acts 14:8-10). The people wanted to offer sacrifices to them, thinking them to be gods. Paul and Barnabas refused (Acts 14:11-18). In spite of the fervor of the town's infatuation with Paul and Barnabas, their popularity was short-lived, and Paul was stoned in Lystra (Acts 14:19). Miraculously, he recovered and went immediately back into Lystra, staying there until the next day (Acts 14:20).

Time after time Paul returned to cities where people had previously tried to kill him. Why did he keep returning when he knew to do so would be life threatening? He went back to strengthen and encourage the new disciples (Acts 14:21-23). What boldness and courage Paul exhibited in doing the Lord's work! That is the kind of courage I want.

Persecution and Torture

All the New Testament writers, except for John, were martyred for their faith. According to early Church tradition, Peter was crucified upside down, Paul was beheaded, James was thrown off the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem and then beaten to death with clubs. It is said that Roman emperor Domitian commanded that the Apostle John be boiled to death in oil, but John only continued to preach from within the pot. Thus John, the head of the church in Ephesus at the time, was exiled to the Isle of Patmos.

During early church history many Christians were tortured, burned at the stake, thrown to wild animals or beheaded. Some

were made to serve as objects of amusement. Others were clad in the hides of beasts and torn to death by dogs. Some were crucified. Others were set on fire to illuminate the night: it is said that Emperor Nero had Christians set afire as human torches to light his gardens.

Shortly before his martyrdom, the Apostle Paul wrote that committed believers should expect persecution and suffering:

> You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings—what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted (2 Timothy 3:10-12).

Being persecuted for faith in Jesus Christ and God's Word has continued throughout church history. Multitudes of believers have been stoned, drowned, had their brains beat out with clubs, tongues cut out, were stretched on racks or wheels until their joints were dislocated or bones broken, had boiling tar poured over them, were roasted alive like a pig on a spit, dragged through streets by horses, had their stomachs cut open and grain put inside and then pigs let loose to feed on the grain and their intestines, noses or hands cut off and many other horrific tortures.

Hebrews 10:33-36 encourages us:

> Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what He has promised.

What if you were made to choose: renounce Christ or be beheaded? Would you die or deny? It is to be hoped that we would all find strength from God to remain faithful. I may one day die for Christ, but the Lord has assured me that my life will not be taken until His purpose is fulfilled. My prayer is, "Lord, let me have the grace, the power, the boldness and the forgiveness of Stephen" (Acts 6:8–7:60).

Christians throughout the world today suffer a wide variety of increasing hostilities and oppression such as loss of freedoms, jobs and income; confiscated property and imprisonment; intensifying persecutions such as being forced into servitude; forced to watch as spouses or children are executed, raped or taken as sex slaves; their houses and churches burned to the ground—sometimes with entire congregations inside; having toes, fingers, hands, noses or heads cut off; and other atrocities—only because they believe the Bible and are committed to Jesus Christ.

By God's grace alone can we endure such atrocities. Although the world is not worthy of them (Hebrews 11:38), Scripture tells of God's high regard for those who long "for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them" (Hebrews 11:16). The splendor of the New Jerusalem is only partially unveiled in Revelation chapters 21 and 22.

Why Suffering and Martyrdom?

I used to wonder why Peter, Paul and other Bible heroes, as well as many believers throughout history, had to be martyred, and why so many today are giving up their lives for Christ. It seemed like defeat. I thought a better testimony would be for God to supernaturally intervene and deliver His people, which He has sometimes done, but not always (Hebrews 11). Later, I came to understand that enduring suffering for Christ was a sign and a seal upon the authentic nature of their testimony. When the world observed their unwavering faith—even in the face of death—they

were more prepared to believe the message of the witness because it had been validated with their own lives.

The Greek word for witness is *martus* or *martur* which means "one who bears witness by his death." This definition is proven in the lives of those who lived and died for what they believed. God's Spirit transformed them. Peter, on the night of Jesus' arrest, cowered at the accusations of a slave girl, but after seeing the resurrected Christ, he became the man who not only boldly witnessed for Christ in Jerusalem (the very city where He was crucified) but he courageously gave up his life for the Lord, being crucified upside down.

Leonard Ravenhill said, "He who fears God fears no man. He who kneels before God will stand in any situation." During times of prayer and fasting, I get on my knees before the Lord so He can strengthen me by His Spirit to stand in any situation.

Jesus said in Matthew 10:28:

> Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

I would rather die living for the Lord, than live denying Him. And since most believers want the courage to die for Christ, it makes sense that we must necessarily have the courage to totally live for Him as well.

Responding to Intimidation

Still relatively new in ministry, I went to hear a former motorcycle gang member and martial arts champion speak at a Christian businessmen's banquet. A teenage girl from a rough background came with one of my female staff to hear him speak. As the teenager was telling my staff member how much she liked what he was saying, the speaker thought she was "acting smart" and not listening. He pointed a finger at her accusingly and said, "I have had enough of you and your interruptions!" He publicly humiliated

her. She got up and stormed out—completely turned off to him and Christianity.

Most of the Christians at the dinner were afraid to confront him, but afterwards my wife and I, along with the staff member, went back to talk to this huge guy. We met him outside as he was leaving. I said to him, "I don't think you used wisdom in dealing with the teenage girl. You are trying to scare people into accepting Christ. You are using your size and your background to intimidate them so they will not talk back to you, but you don't need to use that kind of strategy. You need to deal with your pride, because you are coming across with a very egotistical attitude."

He became hostile and irate. His eyes blazed as he snarled, "Who are you to dare question me? You have never walked in my shoes. You haven't been through what God has taken me through. No one has ever said the things to me that you are saying." I answered, "I don't care what anyone else has said to you. I know what God's Spirit is showing me. You have a problem with pride, and you are using your size and your background to intimidate people."

I stood my ground as he moved toward me. I knew he wanted to hit me. He towered above me like a big, mean grizzly. Karen and the other woman were there, and I was concerned for their safety. He aggressively closed in on me, to deliver an ultimatum. Instead of violence he suddenly softened and said, "Brother, don't you see, the very things you are saying are what God is dealing with me about. That is why I am so angry."

After that breakthrough we had a chance to really talk and share. The next night he came back to speak at a nearby location and his attitude was completely different. He gave an altar call and many people went forward; the response was great.

I feel we had an impact on his life. If only some fearless Christian or Christian leader would have confronted him long before, it could have saved him much grief.

While ministering in Haiti, I met a Haitian pastor whose church was in the midst of a voodoo village. I explained to him that his name "Bill" means "bold protector." I told him, "We are not to be

cowardly nor bashful, but bold. We are not to be conceited or boastful, but confident and courageous in the Lord. We must fearlessly minister for the Lord and stand for the truth of His Word, empowered by His Spirit!"

Modern Day Examples of Courage

A macho soldier drove an hour from his base in Germany to hear me speak Sunday morning and Sunday night at Darby Chapel on a Nuremberg military base. He was strong and brave and afraid of no one or anything. He spent the day with us and later that night he wanted to talk to me alone.

He told me that although he is strong and brave and physically tough—he did not have the kind of courage I mention in my messages. He said, "I have listened to your audio message on *Courage To Stand Alone* several times, and that is what I want!" A few weeks later he was sent to Saudi Arabia to serve in Desert Storm. God protected him in some amazing ways.

Years later we met again in Pennsylvania. This time he sat in my office to inform me that he is faithfully serving Jesus. He told me some of the wonderful things the Lord was doing in his life and that he was in the middle of intense study at seminary. He said he would soon be leaving again for Iraq—this time to serve as a chaplain. He also faithfully served as a chaplain in Afghanistan and at several other Army bases. While serving in Germany, he provided a military escort for my son and me from Frankfurt, Germany, to the Argonne Forest of France where we dedicated the historic Sergeant York Trail and Memorial. A month later he sponsored me to speak to his troops at a chapel service in Germany. What an amazing transformation took place in this young man's life after he discovered the Source of true courage!

During our tenth Holy Land Adventure, we had a meeting with a pastor in Bethlehem who shared his amazing testimony with our group: He had been shot multiple times; his church had been set on fire and the windows broken on several occasions; his brother was martyred in Bethlehem by three men with machetes. Yet still

he courageously proclaims the Gospel in this extremely dangerous environment. He said he will continue doing so until the day he dies.

I can tell about Josef whom I met while speaking at an Arab Center in California. He had been Saddam Hussein's English interpreter during the first Iraqi war (Desert Storm). Being a Christian and falsely accused as a traitor, he was tortured for several months. Instead of denying Jesus Christ he chose to believe Jesus' words: "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matthew 5:11-12).

There are many others in the U.S. and across the world I have either met or have heard about from eye witnesses who have suffered much for the cause of Christ. These courageous Christians are part of God's elite "heroes of the faith" whom God will one day richly reward!

Even Me

God transformed me from a person who always conformed to peer pressure and was afraid of the dark, to one who refuses to compromise or conform to anything that dishonors my Lord. I have been mocked, ridiculed, threatened and had my life endangered on several occasions while standing alone for Christ. His Spirit has enabled me to remain strong under periods of tremendous pressure and opposition.

God changed my life gradually. I did not wake up the day after giving my life to Christ and suddenly have the courage and strength to stand alone. As I studied and obeyed His Word; as I prayed and fasted, His Spirit empowered me to live for Him no matter what the cost.

In my basement, I used to have a training area with a speed bag on the left, a 70-pound heavy bag on the right and a double-ended striking bag in the center. I would work out on all three

simultaneously using both hands and feet. I purposely put myself through all kinds of rigorous training. Why? Because I wanted to be able to handle any circumstances in which I might find myself. So too, God allows us to face obstacles and difficulties to help us grow strong and to keep us in shape spiritually. Then we can stand in any situation, no matter how great the pressure.

Before discontinuing formal training in the martial arts, one of the drills was to stand alone in the center of a circle of 15-20 people. Each person surrounding me was given a number, but staggered so an attack could come from anywhere. The instructor would call out a number and that person quickly came at me with a strike, kick or combination of both. I had to block the assault then counterattack. I never knew from what direction an opponent was coming—front, back or side—or what they were going to do. This exercise was to train us on how to deal with unexpected situations on the street. So it is in life. God allows the obstacles, opposition and pressures to mold us, develop our spiritual muscles and prepare us for whatever lies ahead.

Ultimate Peer Pressure

In Revelation 13:8 we are told, "All who dwell on the earth will worship him [antichrist], everyone whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who has been slain" (NASB). This will be the ultimate in peer pressure, conformity and compromise. Deny or die! For all who refuse to worship the image of the beast will be killed (Revelation 13:15).

If you cannot resist peer pressure now, then you had better let God infuse you with His power because there is coming a day in the near future when all of society will be in total rebellion against the Lord and hostile toward His people; the cost will be high to stand for Jesus Christ.

Revelation 21:8 says:

> But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.

Why the cowardly? Because the cowardly, the compromiser and worldly conformist will, for the sake of convenience or out of fear for loss of power, prestige, property or life—refuse God's gift of salvation through Jesus Christ (even though they are convinced of its truth) or they will deny Him in times of persecution. Unless they truly repent, the cowardly are no better off than the murderers, sexually immoral and idolators who will be outcasts from God's eternal kingdom.

Throughout the ages there has always been a remnant of God's people who have had the God-given courage and strength to remain standing, like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. God accepts no excuse for cowardly denial of Him like those who justified why they bowed down to Nebuchadnezzar's golden image.

A case in point: After several conversations with a retired Marine, he admitted the evidence for Christ was overwhelming and said, "You have convinced me, but I have a problem. I don't like to be laughed at." I replied, "You can either stand alone for Christ now or one day stand alone before Him."

False Ideas

Becoming a Christian was not an easy choice for me as a teenager because of the stigma of being considered weak. It was a perception I did not want my peers to have of me. Wanting to be considered tough, I hung around with the toughest of guys which meant rebellious and wild behavior. Looking back I realize how foolish and weak that really was. Besides, the "toughest of the tough" is Jesus Christ who will defeat all His foes with the brightness of His coming and the words of His mouth! That is whose side I want to be on—the One that wins in the end and for all eternity!

Let us get a proper perspective of courage: Goliath was rough and tough. David was smaller and weaker; he tended sheep while his older brothers went off to war. David wrote psalms and sang songs of praise to the Lord, while Goliath was a crude, boastful, mighty warrior who intimidated both the Philistines as well as the Israelites. Yet who do we remember as the brave and powerful one? Not Goliath but David. It took far more courage for David to face Goliath than for Goliath to combat David.

I have seen tough people cry like babies when sentenced to prison; been there when supposedly brave men and women were terrified in the face of impending death; heard arrogant boasts dwindle to fearful cries; witnessed extremely strong people become exceedingly weak.

Choose real courage and true strength—not the distorted perceptions of people who are influenced by foolish and boastful words or wild and unrestrained behavior. These may impress for a brief time those who are easily astonished by such verbosity and physical displays, but in the end they will look just like Goliath—a defeated fool.

That Great Multitude

You may be facing strong peer pressure today; feeling like you are in the shrinking minority because almost everyone at school, college or work rejects the Bible as God's unique revelation of truth. However, one day you will be with the billions of people since Creation—heroes of the faith, prophets, kings, warriors, disciples, martyrs from every generation throughout history, men and women, children and teens from across the globe—who resisted the pressures of their day and became part of that great multitude who will inherit all that the Lord has prepared for those who love and honor Him; believers from throughout the ages will live with God forever. Those already in Heaven will one day be joined by a vast host:

> After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues [languages], standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands (Revelation 7:9 NASB).

On that Day when Jesus Christ establishes His eternal Kingdom, those whose names are written in the Book of Life will receive all He has prepared for those who love Him and obey His Word. We will have endless time to enjoy and explore the wonders of a restored paradise on Earth and share in the countless adventures that await us throughout the expanse of the entire universe. We will never cease to be amazed by the glory of our God and overjoyed with the blessings He will lavish on His children.

By contrast, those who reject God's offer of salvation in this life, to enjoy the convenience of compromise, pleasure, popularity or prestige will be named among the "cowardly" mentioned in Revelation 21:8. They will forfeit God's blessed Kingdom, quarantined from His glorious presence.

Don't succumb to the seductive spirit of this age. Don't compromise your faith and fashion your lifestyle to the current cultural trends and popular morality standards. Be encouraged, rather, by the throngs of people who have gone before you and whose testimonies spur you on:

> Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us (Hebrews 12:1).

Be a part of the millions of people alive on this planet today who faithfully serve and honor Jesus Christ in spite of ridicule, oppression, hostility, persecution and someday, even martyrdom. I promise that you will never regret serving Jesus Christ. And I assure everyone who rejects or refuses to accept Him that they will eternally regret that decision.

Believers throughout the history of the Church have fought in the "arena of life" to proclaim the Gospel. Now it is our time to stand strong in the "arena" for Christ. We must not shrink back or cower in fear. That great cloud of witnesses, in fact, all of Heaven, is watching and cheering us on!

Sometimes We Stand Alone

After graduating from Bible college, I took a position as a youth pastor in North Carolina. To supplement my income, I was employed by a convenience store from 11 p.m. to 7 a.m, the graveyard shift, where I worked alone. To show how dangerous this could be, a man in a similar store just a few miles down the road had been robbed and shot to death. It was in this setting that a gang came in from a neighboring city, spread out through the store, and shoplifted. Some young men who often came into the store said, "Bill, when that gang comes in again, we are going to stand with you, and we will get the stuff back." I said, "Okay guys, great. Let's do it."

Sure enough, the gang came when my buddies happened to be there. As before, the gang went through the store and began to steal things. They paid for a few items and then walked outside with all the stuff they had stolen and got into their car. I said, "Okay guys, you told me if they stole again you would stand with me. Let's go out there and get the stuff back."

One guy said, "Man, there are six of them and four of us!" He went back in the cooler to hide. Another guy went in the rest room and locked the door. The third guy sat there on the check-out counter saying, "No way! There are too many of them, Bill." I replied, "Thanks guys!" and walked outside by myself. I knocked on their car door window and they rolled it down. "Guys," I said, "you stole some stuff, and I want it back." All four doors opened and the six of them got out and encircled me. There was no way in that close proximity that I could effectively defend myself. I was totally vulnerable. But again I said, "Guys, you stole some stuff and I want it back!" They looked at me, then at each other. They didn't know

whether to attack me or what to do. Then all of a sudden they reached into their pockets, and began to pull out some of the merchandise. They threw it at me, got in their car, and drove off.

Don't be foolish or crazy for that is tempting the Lord. However, there comes a point in our lives when we can no longer compromise and conform but must stand for what is right and true.

The World Does Not Need More Conformers

I often speak at school assemblies on self-control, peer pressure, courage and determination. I sometimes incorporate such demonstrations as kicking cigarettes out of volunteers' mouths, and other feats to illustrate my message. I often end the assembly by having four volunteers come forward. One grabs my right wrist, one grabs my left wrist, one comes from behind to grab me, and the other attacks from the front. Each one pulls me the way he wants me to go. They want me to compromise, they want me to conform. When it appears I will be pulled apart I say, "No!" as I quickly kick all four of them, one after the other, leaving them lying at my feet. I do this to demonstrate that we must refuse to be victimized by peer pressure.

The world does not need more wasted lives, burnouts, conformers, compromisers or those who cave to all the peer pressure. There are already enough weak-kneed, cowardly people in this world and in the Church today. What we do need are those with God-given courage to stand up and make their lives count. Instead of being influenced by the world, let's influence our world for Jesus Christ!

Will you allow the Lord to make you into a true champion? Will you ask Him to instill within you His own courage and strength? Will you refuse to compromise and conform to the world for the sake of convenience? Instead, will you be willing to stand alone, if need be, even in the face of extreme pressure and opposition?

The Strongest

It has been said that a strong person stands up for him or herself and a stronger person stands up for others. But I say that the strongest of people stand up for their testimony of Jesus Christ and God's Word.

As a teenager, my idea of a man of God was that of a weak, foolish, boring, cowardly person—a real loser! After many years of living for Christ, I now know better: The wisest, strongest and most courageous decision of my life was in receiving Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord and living for Him. My idea today of a true man of God is of a person strong, wise, adventurous, courageous—a true Champion!

Determination to Never Give Up

All through my younger years I was often told that what I planned to do was impossible. I was repeatedly told: "You can't do it! You are too young, too small, too weak, too poor. You will never make it. You might as well give up!"

So, as one who never really had much potential and was often considered the least likely to succeed in high school and college, who would have thought that one day I would start a ministry that would grow into a multifaceted, international outreach which was to have an impact on tens of thousands of youth and adults. What made the difference in my life? I had one God-given characteristic in my favor: determination.

During my junior year of high school after just turning 16, I went out for football. Some of my friends—who were not on the team—said I would quit within a few weeks. But although I was a rookie and inexperienced, I was determined to stick it out. Unlike junior high basketball, where I was cut after the first practice, in football no one was cut—you just quit. However, I was determined to hang in there.

During the preseason the coach began to notice that I was strong for my size. I weighed only 160 pounds but was able to bench press 250 pounds, so the coach would say to his upperclass players, "Look at Rudge, he is benching more than you big linemen." That did not make me real popular with them. A few times they formed a circle around me during practice so the coaches could not see, hit me with their forearms and helmets and kicked me with their practice spikes. But I would not quit.

Even though I sat on the bench most of the time during games, still I would not quit. I didn't play in any varsity games my junior year, and only in about five quarters my senior year. Part of that

was my own fault, because when the coach would put me in during practice, I wouldn't know the plays or was skipping practice altogether due to chasing girls. I sealed my fate when I skipped a game for a party, but realizing I might be thrown off the team, drove alone that night to a game (over an hour away), arriving too late to suit up.

In the few games I did play, after the defensive play was called in the huddle, I'd have to ask another player what I was supposed to do. It was midway through my senior season when I finally became motivated to play, but by then it was too late. The coaches had given me chances, but I wasted them.

My main reason in going out for football was for the physical conditioning. I guess I was not motivated enough to really want to play; my goal was only to stick it out, and that is all I achieved. You will never go higher than your goals.

Several years later, I sponsored a multimedia assembly at an area high school entitled "Champions." Its basic message was that no matter what your circumstances or obstacles, if you have determination, you can be a champion. A true champion never gives up, never quits. Some of the film footage showed a Vietnam vet who had both legs blown off, yet he refused to give up and became a weightlifting champion. The school principal told me after the assembly that one of the worst students came up to him and said, "Maybe there is still hope for me."

Walking down the aisle to the front of the auditorium was a teacher who was also one of the football coaches. As he headed towards me, I recognized him as one of the big upperclass linemen who had beat on me at football practice during my rookie year. My mind flashed back and I thought he was going to forearm me upside the head and say, "You were a rookie then Rudge, and as far as I am concerned you are still a rookie." He walked up to me, looked me right in the eye and said he thought my assembly was one of the best ever.

Catching a Lift

When I began to lift weights in seventh grade, I was often told to stop wasting my time because I was skinny and weak. The motivation that kept me going was my desire to become muscular like my older brother Ken. I wanted to overcome my puny physique because I was tired of being pushed around. My goal was to be the strongest in my class by the time I graduated high school.

Sometimes I had weightlifting partners and sometimes I had to workout alone, but through years of relentless training my weak-guy image was changing—my skinny body was developing muscles! When I graduated, pound for pound I had achieved my goal, because I weighed only 160 pounds and was benching almost 300 pounds. Eventually, at age 18, I reached my benching maximum of 335 pounds, which back in 1971 was fantastic, especially since I weighed only 165 pounds.

When I started with karate at age 17, I was told, "You will never be any good at karate, Rudge. You're too muscle-bound from lifting weights. You're too tight. You have no control." They were right. I purposely had no control when sparring. By the second year, however, they were calling me Godzilla because of my sparring ability and because I was the strongest and craziest in the class.

Graduating at age 17, I was always one of the youngest among my peers—often competing against guys that were one or two years older than I was. I had to learn to fight to survive, but this challenge turned into an advantage because it made me strong and determined.

I am not telling this to boast, but to show that by determination alone, we can do things thought impossible. How much more can we accomplish for the Lord if we are this determined and sold out for Him?

Married!

When I became a Christian, many of my friends rejected me. They thought it was just another fad and would not last. That was in May 1971...and I am still walking with the Lord.

When Karen and I ran away and got married, I was 18 and she was 17. I was making only $10 a week cutting grass—I did not want a full time job before accepting Christ because I liked to workout and party. Almost everyone told Karen to get away from me and said our marriage would not even last a year. That was in June 1971...and we are still married.

My wife and I arrived at Bible college as new Christians with little money and no jobs. Very few people thought we would survive. Most of the other students were raised in church and knew much more about the Bible than I did. I struggled with things like: Who was Paul? How do I find the book of Romans? Many of the students thought I would never finish Bible college because I had cheated my way through high school. Early on at Bible college I was voted in one class to be the least likely to succeed in ministry.

Nevertheless, I finished all four years with good grades, though I had to work 40 - 60 hours a week on an assembly line, along with classes and homework. In the beginning of my junior year, we had a daughter. By my senior year, I was running a growing youth group for a country church, teaching exercise and self-defense classes at the college and YMCA, and receiving unsolicited scholarships from the Bible college to help with my tuition. Nearing graduation, we had to sell our mobile home so the college made a former professor's home on campus available to us. The college was even considering offering me the opportunity to stay on as a fitness instructor—if they had sufficient funds for such a position.

It was in my senior year at Bible college that I had to switch from night to day school to fulfill the requirements for my degree. As a result, I had to quit my job at the window factory and find new employment. I chose to work for United Companies selling financial investments and life insurance. During an extensive training program, all the other trainees bragged how great they would be and how much they would sell. I just kept my mouth shut and quietly planned my strategy. At the end of the training program, a vote was taken on who would be the most likely to succeed and who would be the least likely to succeed. Turns out, the guy with

the biggest mouth, the one who cheered the loudest and bragged the most about how great he was going to be as a salesperson was voted most likely to succeed. No surprise here, I was voted least likely to succeed.

Yet within three weeks, at the state convention and in front of hundreds of people, I was the only one from our class to be promoted to area manager. I would be receiving commissions from many of the same trainees who had voted me least likely to succeed. Less than one year later—by the time I graduated from college—I was the only one from that training program still working for the company.

Ironically, many of the students at Bible college who early on thought I would drop out or had voted me least likely to succeed never made it into ministry. Several others later gave up ministry altogether.

Alma Mater

The new president of the college from which I had graduated called to book me at their new campus in Virginia. This would be my second speaking engagement at my alma mater. During our phone conversation, he told me that back in 1975 (when I was fresh out of Bible college), the pastor of the church in North Carolina where I was youth pastor said to him, "Bill just doesn't have ministry in him, and I advised him to give it up." Now a few years later, the president of my alma mater was asking me to address the student body on "Reaching Your Maximum Potential" and how we had developed a successful, multifaceted ministry. (Isn't it amazing how things change?)

Since then I have been blessed to train hundreds of staff and volunteers—many of whom are serving in churches, ministries or missions—as well as training missionaries, pastors, chaplains, military personnel (enlisted men and women, and officers) and leaders of various ministries and organizations. The Lord has also opened doors for me to speak at several pastors' and leadership conferences in the U.S. and other countries.

God inspired me to design some innovative activities and outreaches—several of which were published in magazines. My dramatized testimony on *Unshackled* (produced by Pacific Garden Mission) was featured worldwide on over 1200 radio stations. That and some of my books have been translated into several other languages. Only God could transform a life like mine and make it profitable for His Kingdom!

Bare Beginnings

In August of 1977, with virtually no money, staff or facilities—just a lot of God-given determination—Karen and I started this ministry in the upstairs apartment of my parents' home. I used the kitchen table as a desk and Karen kept the ministry records in a file cabinet in our bedroom. Few people thought we would succeed. Many said, "Others have tried and failed; you will too!" Nevertheless, with God's help we persevered and for over 45 years have witnessed Him do the impossible.

Recently, after speaking at a local church where I had mentioned in my sermon about being voted least likely to succeed at Bible college, an older man told me that he remembered when I started my ministry. He had said to his wife, "He'll never make it." He paused and said, "I am so glad you did make it!"

Shattered Ankle

The ministry was less than a year old, starting to really go, when I broke my ankle at age 27 in a freak accident at one of our teen outreaches at the roller rink. I was carrying a chair and wearing skates when I tripped. Not wanting to break the chair, I crossed my legs and sat down. When I reached down to straighten my foot and it fell limp to the side from the weight of the skates, I knew I was in trouble.

I was in the middle of the rink. Pain began to surge through my body, but I sat there long enough to introduce the guest speaker. The young people thought I was putting on an act to be funny, so they were all laughing and clapping. When I finished the

introduction, some of my staff and youth realized something was wrong by the pained expression on my face so they came over and helped carry me out. Karen and a staff member drove me to the hospital. I thought they would just put a cast on me and send me home. I was shocked when the doctor said, "You are going to have to stay here." A nurse who supported our ministry told me years later that she was on duty when I came in and someone told her, "The kid from the West Hill who became a minister was brought in."

My ankle required extensive surgery, and I was hospitalized for a week. It appeared the ministry would end abruptly because it would wipe us out financially since I did not have hospitalization insurance. Karen and I were paying many of the ministry bills from the jobs I was working on the side; plus, much of the ministry at that time was based on my physical abilities: leading recreation, fitness classes, presenting self-defense clinics and giving demonstrations in schools and churches.

In the past I had fallen many times performing various physical feats but had never been injured. Then, just tripping with skates on caused one of the worst breaks the orthopedic surgeon said he had ever seen—other than from severe car wrecks. During the surgery the doctor had to put a seven-inch rod in one side of my ankle and into the bone marrow of my leg, and wire in the other side of my ankle. Twice my cast turned red from bleeding through following the surgery and had to be changed.

The day I was released from the hospital, I was scheduled to speak at my alma mater. The doctor discouraged me from traveling so far, and only permitted it because of my persistence. It was the first time the college had asked me to speak since my graduation. (I had accepted the engagement before the accident, but don't like to cancel when I make a commitment.) Karen drove me the three hours to Mount Vernon Bible College in central Ohio. I had to sit preaching on a stool with a pillow under my leg, elevated on a chair; the pain was extreme, but I endured it. The response to my lecture by students and faculty was very good and made the trip worthwhile.

Determined to strengthen my ankle and keep in shape, as soon as I recovered from the anesthesia I began to design and implement my own rehabilitation program. At first it was merely moving my toes in my cast and doing light exercises in my hospital bed. I forced myself to stand on crutches and walk the halls even though the pain was excruciating. (I did this years before it was recommended to be up and moving right after surgery—back then it was usually just bed rest.)

Once at home, I modified my strength training routine to accommodate my physical limitations: I would lie in bed or on the floor and use dumbbells, or go outside and hobble on my crutches or hop on one foot to the swing set to do pull-ups, and hop on one foot up the steps on the monkey bars to do dips. After the cast was off, I designed various exercises to strengthen my injured ankle and leg—long before physical therapy became popular.

After the cast was removed, the doctor said I would not be able to walk without crutches for several weeks. I asked him, "Doc, will I be able to play football and do karate kicks again?" He looked at me and said, "I don't know. Could you do it before?" I kept exercising and strengthening my leg. When I walked into his office without crutches—only using a cane—less than a week after having the cast removed, the doctor was amazed at the speed of my recovery.

Instead of destroying me, as I had feared, these circumstances became somewhat of a blessing and victory! The advantage of this near disaster affirmed my faith and increased my determination. I learned that no matter what should happen, God would always make a way, and that I was never to give up.

Expansion

When we desperately needed larger facilities for our expanding ministry, it appeared there was no possible way we could afford them. However, God moved in a special way and 3.7 acres of prime land was donated! Almost everyone (including our Board of Directors) said it would be impossible to build a ministry center and

parsonage without a bank loan. Nonetheless, I was convinced God would be faithful to fulfill what He was leading me to do.

In obedience to His will, we stepped out on total faith as we began, proceeded with construction, and finished our facilities without a cent of interest being paid. The seemingly impossible dream God had given us became a reality. The Lord was glorified because we dared to trust Him and persevered in overcoming what clearly appeared to be a series of insurmountable hurdles. The many obstacles we faced and the miracles we witnessed in the process of securing that land and the building of several ministry centers are recorded in a book I later wrote, *Overcoming the Giants in Your Life*.

Philippians 4:13

There are many other stories I could share—examples of how God has enabled us to accomplish that which others thought impossible. In reality, people were right for thinking I did not have much potential. However, I have built my life and ministry on the belief that I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me (Philippians 4:13). Has it proven true? God took a young kid from the West Hill of Sharon, Pennsylvania, without hope or obvious potential, and has done the impossible in my life and ministry. I think He chose me—the least of all—to display His transforming power and to vividly illustrate that if He can use me, He can use anyone!

One of the reasons we have such faithful volunteers and supporters for our ministry is that they know I am going to do what I say I am going to do. If I believe God has led me to do something, then nothing or no one will stop me. I will persevere until it is accomplished. My process is to seek God's will for my life and ministry, then have the determination to never give up until the Lord either fulfills what He led me to do, or gives definite, new direction.

Nothing I have learned has come easily. My best degree is from the "school of hard knocks." That is how God has increased my

determination. Sure, I have been knocked down many times, but God has always given me the strength and motivation to get back up again. I realize that real failure is not when you fall; it is when you stay down and give up in defeat.

This puts me in mind of a story about a wise old man. Someone asked him how he became so wise, to which he replied, "Experience." Then asked how he got so much experience he responded, "By making mistakes."

I have always enjoyed a challenge. It seems the more obstacles I face and the more opposition I receive, the more determined I become. Countless times throughout my life and ministry, I have had to face the cold reality that circumstances say, "You cannot do it," and people said, "You will never do it," but God's Word reminds us, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." The Lord has instilled within me the mentality of never giving up—it is victory or death. No surrender. No retreat.

Obstacle Course

The Ultimate Challenge Obstacle & Fitness Course at our ministry center has provided many opportunities to train sports teams, youth groups, church groups, military personnel (soldiers, sailors, marines), mission teams preparing for upcoming trips, Scouts, children, teens, adults and families—all free of charge. I customize every obstacle course adventure to meet specific needs, goals and levels of intensity for each group. Various rigorous training routines have been designed to help prepare military recruits for the challenges that lie ahead at boot camp and beyond, and to prepare athletes for upcoming competition. We incorporate innovative drills, relay races, recreational or sports activities, and individual or team competitions.

During a summer event for youth, I gave the opening instructions on necessary attitudes that would help them navigate the course: confidence, courage and determination. With great effort the participants met the challenges, but one lesson was highlighted when one of the smallest youths volunteered first to scale the

course's 7-foot wall. He valiantly ran with great determination, leaping toward the top of the wall repeatedly. After finally realizing he could not reach his goal alone, the other boys helped boost him up and over. This encouraged others to try. In addition, this young teen accepted the challenge of breaking the record for the most times back and forth across the oversized monkey bars. He fell short of this goal also but he gave it all he had. Like David facing Goliath, he did not let the size of the challenge deter him. We, too, can face life's challenges with courage and determination because the "battle belongs to the Lord" and He will be our Helper.

Speaking in the city of Jim Thorpe, Pennsylvania for a series of engagements, I designed a special outreach including relays and an obstacle course in a neighborhood that was nicknamed "Hell's Half Acre." It was like a time warp back to the 1960s and was similar to the neighborhood in which I had been raised. Both the youth and the adults loved the competition. Before the start of a three-legged race, Steven, a youth of about twelve years of age, hobbled over to me with a crutch. His leg was badly crippled, yet he asked if he could compete in the three-legged race. He said, "I don't need a partner as I already have three legs." I told him to go for it. He competed with fervent determination and nearly won the race. Before sharing my testimony following the competition, I acknowledged this youth for his courage, determination and attitude, then awarded him a *Reaching Your Maximum Potential* T-shirt which he appreciated and greatly deserved.

What is Your Dream?

Proverbs 29:18 (NASB) says:

> Where there is no vision [revelation], the people are unrestrained [out of control], but happy [blessed] is one who keeps the Law.

In Cleveland, Ohio, Jesse Owens met Charlie Paddock, known at the time as "the fastest man alive." Jesse was only 13 but was inspired with the dream to become the fastest human being alive.

His coach, Charles Riley told Jesse, "Everybody should have a dream. Every man must remember that dreams are high and that you must climb a ladder to reach them." Then he told him four important rungs of the ladder he must climb to attain his dream: 1. Dedication [Commitment] 2. Determination 3. Self-Discipline 4. Attitude.

Years later, in 1936 at the Berlin Olympics in front of Adolf Hitler, Jesse won four gold medals! What is your dream? You must build a similar ladder to it.

To have determination that never gives up, you must have goals, dreams and vision. Believe that through Christ you can do it. Be willing to pay the price at all cost, and be motivated and empowered by His Spirit to persevere no matter what the challenge.

What goals and vision has the Lord given you through study of His Word and prayer? If you do not have any, then spend time in Scripture, prayer and fasting, and God will put His goals, His dreams, His vision and His desires in your heart. One of the reasons I am still in the ministry and still excited is due to my goals and vision for the future. When I achieve one goal, God gives me one or two more. That keeps me motivated.

I often pray: "Lord, put Your goals, dreams and vision in my heart. Give me unwavering faith to believe You and the motivation and determination to persevere." And remember, anything worth doing is worth doing with excellence. Strive to be the best you can be at whatever you do.

Motivation Saves My Daughter

You can accomplish almost anything if you are motivated. When my daughter was a one-and-a-half-year-old toddler, I was in my senior year at Bible college. It was close to graduation, so we sold our mobile home and were living in a former teacher's house on campus. Someone was supposed to be watching our daughter Tabitha. Suddenly I felt compelled to look out the second-floor window and saw that she was playing in the middle of the road in

rainwater and mud. The road had a sharp curve which would obstruct a driver from seeing that someone was in the road—especially a little one-and-a-half-year-old who was sitting down. If a car were to come it would crush her little body. I had already lost a seven-year-old brother, hit by a car, so I was motivated to act quickly.

I jumped down one flight of steps, turned 180 degrees and jumped down another flight. In my haste I forgot about the low ceiling at the bottom of the steps. My forehead hit the ceiling and split open. The impact was so hard it bent the metal covering and threw me back so that my lower back hit the front edge of the steps. But I was *motivated* and *nothing* was going to stop me from getting to her—not even the dazed and disoriented state I was in, nor the blood which was oozing from my forehead down my face. I got up and ran directly to Tabitha, scooped her out of the road and brought her back inside. It was only then I felt how much my head and back hurt.

The point is this: I had one goal—get Tabitha out of that life-threatening situation and back to safety—and I had one motivation—my overwhelming love for my daughter. We must not only have a vision but also the motivation which stirs us to action.

Practical Aids to the Development of Perseverance

1. Poison Ivy

My mentality is such that I am not going to quit until I accomplish the goal. For example, almost every summer I would cut down weeds and get poison ivy. Normally I would go to the doctor for medication, and if it was serious enough, he would give me a shot.

As it happened, during the summer of 1982, my oldest brother, Larry, and I were cleaning out brush on recently donated ministry property filled with poison ivy. We wore protective gloves as we cut it down, but then we burned it, not realizing that the oils from burning poison ivy are carried in the smoke, and a rash began to spread all over my body. Tired of catching poison ivy, I decided to endure it and build up my body's resistance against it. I did not

know if this was medically accurate, but it made sense to me at the time. All I did was take extra immune building nutrients and put on calamine lotion. I went to the Buhl Club to take a steam bath to supposedly sweat it out, but it was not working that day. (Thank the Lord it was not, for later I learned that it would have spread even more!)

As any loving husband would do, I shared it with my wife. We were both super itchy but determined to beat it. It took two weeks, but the rash finally disappeared. I did not get a poison ivy rash again for over 25 years: either I built up my immunity or my body was afraid of what I might make it go through! The point is not that you should be careless with poison ivy, but that we all need to develop an attitude of determination. God wants us to have a persevering spirit; to endure until we accomplish His purpose and achieve a victory.

2. Yellow Jackets

Poison ivy was challenging enough, but it paled in comparison to my yellow jacket encounters. Several summers ago, yellow jackets built a nest inside the wall of my house right next to the front door. It was impossible to spray inside it, so over a period of weeks I took a few minutes here and there to use one, sometimes two, fly swatters in an attempt to eliminate them. Although I never liked video games, this became an exciting competition! At first, I was fighting only one or two "jackets" at a time as they entered or exited their hive, but it quickly escalated to five or more agitated yellow jackets swarming outside the nest. I would hit one or more of them with the fly swatter, then jump back so as not to get stung. I was able to kill about 400 of them before getting stung twice on my hands. After that, it became a little more intense, but I was able to get approximately 75 more before the hive was silenced.

A few years later, on a beautiful day in mid-September, I was cutting the grass on a trail I had made in the woods near our obstacle course where I gave my grandchildren rides in wheelbarrows, wagons and on sleds in the winter time. Without my

realizing it, the push mower ran over an in-ground yellow jacket's nest. Initially I thought I was caught in a jagger bush until I saw yellow jackets swarming me from all directions. I abandoned the mower and ran out of the woods as fast as I could toward the house over 100 yards away—being stung repeatedly along the way. They were all over my sleeveless muscle shirt, so I ripped it off, also noticing they were all over my thin tan pants (with a huge rip across the knee). On the way to the house, I was slapping bees with my palms as fast as I could on my arms, legs and neck to kill as many as I could. Once inside I called out, "Karen, I need your help." She came and began helping me hit the ones on me with the shoes I took off (I wasn't wearing socks). One went after her, so she took off screaming then came back and helped me kill the rest. We got them all except one who flew away in the house. I was stung many times on the neck, hand, leg, shoulder, side, stomach and back. Once again, I self-treated the stings and persevered through the pain and swelling for the next few days.

3. Sparks Fly

A couple years later I was cutting grass at my daughter's house while her family was gone. The blades of the push mower hit the metal base of a soccer goal buried in tall grass. I saw sparks fly and felt them hit my legs since I was wearing shorts. Quickly, I backed the mower up then cautiously cut over the metal base again. Suddenly, I felt hot sparks all over my legs. Confused, since I had tilted the mower so the blades would not hit the metal, I looked down and realized it was not sparks at all burning me, but yellow jackets stinging me! I fled with them in hot pursuit. Being continuously stung, I ripped off my shirt—wildly slapping all over my body to kill as many as possible. My only hope of getting them off me was the swimming pool—about 30 yards from their nest. Karen hadn't planned to come with me to our daughter's house but thank God she did! She heard me yelling and saw the "jackets" swarming me. Thinking quickly, she held down the button to roll back the pool cover—just far enough to uncover the shallow end. Realizing my cell phone was in my pocket I pulled it out and threw

it onto a lounge chair as I jumped in the pool with my attackers still swarming above. It took a few dunks and much frantic splashing to disperse them. One ended up in the pocket of my shorts and stung me repeatedly on the hip when I came out of the pool until I smashed him.

I had been stung over 25 times (left foot many times, back of both hands, between fingers on left hand and thumb of right hand, back of neck, up and down my left calf and thigh and hip). To ease the pain, I saturated a paper towel with apple cider vinegar and rubbed it over the stings several times, then applied ice to limit the swelling. After driving home to take a cold shower, I put manuka honey on each of the stings. I then drove back to my daughter's house to let their dogs out, cautiously put the push mower away and burned out the underground nest later that night. The next morning I experienced burning pain, swelling, nausea and chills. Not being one to take medication or go to the hospital unless it is a life-threatening situation, over the next few days, I applied aloe vera gel several times a day. I wanted to see how my body would respond and just how much I could take, and indirectly, a way to identify with the pain and suffering many Christians throughout the world experience daily.

Two days following the attack, I stained my grandchildren's swing set. After the four-hour job my left hand was badly swollen and hurting, but determined, I finished what I had started. The next morning the swelling and pain were almost gone (except when Ryder, their Siberian husky, would gently chew on my arms and hands as I slept). Then the itching began, but three and a half days after the stings I was symptom free.

4. Brown Recluse Spider Bite to the California Wildfires

Determination is no doubt an attribute that God has gifted me with, and perhaps the poison ivy incident taught me how to persevere through other adversities I would face. But space here permits me to only touch on the part determination played in enabling me to endure months of self-care required for the

treatment of a brown recluse spider bite. (Trapper John, the ultimate outdoorsman who was an expert on insects, animals and plants, said it could have cost me my arm, or even my life.)

A determination mindset enabled me to face two surgeries without anesthesia, at my insistence—one of which, so I could skip the recovery room and be back to the ministry center in time for a previously scheduled meeting. (The surgeon and anesthesiologist told me I was the first person at that clinic to have hernia surgery with merely a local to numb the area, without being put under.)

Determination helped me give up junk food—almost completely since the age of 30— and to fast for 28 days (a real feat for someone already lean). Determination enabled me to persevere through ailments such as a tooth abscess that could have proven fatal.

The Lord's protection along with determination enabled Karen and me to survive the California wildfires when we seemed to be trapped—certain we would perish. Afterward, I stayed and served as a chaplain for the Red Cross for a month. I spit up dark phlegm from my lungs and was unable to get a full breath of air for over a year.

Faith with determination motivated me on several occasions to tell my staff to set up for outside youth outreaches in spite of threatening thunderstorms, nor to stop building projects in spite of "impossible" circumstances. Canceling or quitting has never been an option for me. When the Lord led me to sell our former ministry center, I persevered in faith for two and a half years until it was accomplished. These and many other challenges, and the miraculous ways in which the Lord overcame them—as we persevered in faith—are recorded in my book, *Overcoming the Giants in Your Life*.

The Snow Run

The infamous Snow Run began one cold and snowy evening many years ago. I was at home, working on a message. It was late at night, but I needed something at the ministry center—a distance

of about 100 yards (the length of a football field). Instead of taking the time to put on socks and shoes, I ran barefoot over to the center. Being a challenge, an adventure and a time-saver, I continued this practice through snow and ice many times. Even now, when guests visit us during the winter, I will ask if they want to do the Snow Run, and a few (especially my grandchildren) have run it with me, but most—though curious—decline.

I love doing things like the Snow Run because the Lord usually gives me spiritual applications to share. For instance, a believer's daily walk with Him is like the Snow Run in many ways. First, you "count the cost" and mentally prepare yourself for the ordeal that lies ahead. You consider the temperature, terrain and time of day or night to determine the level of difficulty. (Be sure to have the ministry door key ready or are able to make it to the obstacle course and then back to the house!) By way of parallel, Jesus said to count the cost before becoming His disciple. Before embarking on any endeavor in His name, you must be certain of being led by His Spirit and His Word, and that your heart is prepared for whatever might lie ahead.

Second, as a barefoot runner in shorts and T-shirt, you must run swiftly and make each step count; you cannot look back lest you slip and fall. So too, believers must throw off every sin that so easily entangles and swiftly run the race of faith, making each day count for the Lord. We must forget what lies behind and press on with faith and determination.

As a Snow Runner, you must not divert to the right or to the left because after a few steps, your feet start burning. In like manner, the believer in Jesus Christ must be focused on Him, not turning to the right or to the left lest the enemy divert, defeat and devour you. By the time you are halfway across the snow-covered field, your feet feel like cement blocks, then quickly go numb; you cannot stop or you may have to crawl back. Likewise, for a true believer in Christ, stopping or giving up is not an option—you must stay faithful until the very end.

Running with little or no snow is even more difficult because the ground is covered with hard, uneven clumps of ice and dirt that hurt the bottoms of your feet. In the same way, living for Jesus without the power of the Holy Spirit and the authority of God's Word will hurt and hinder your witness and effectiveness.

Although watchers may not realize the true challenge and difficulty of the Snow Run, participants in bare feet, wearing only shorts and a T-shirt, quickly understand the fortitude required to accomplish this feat. (At night, when it is below zero, with a foot of snow on the ground and the wind is blowing hard, this is especially true!) Similarly, those who do not know the Lord cannot comprehend the commitment and sacrifice of the true Christian who must often show tremendous courage to face the onslaught of the enemy and stand—sometimes alone—in the midst of opposition.

Approaching the ministry center parking lot, a burst of energy is needed to leap or climb over a snow bank several feet high left by the snow plow. Likewise, the believer will face many barriers and obstacles left to impede progress but can be overcome through the energizing power of Christ.

Jumping over the snow mound, you will slide across an icy parking lot. If you keep your balance, you won't fall on the blacktop or crash into the steps or front door of the ministry center and injure yourself! As believers, we maintain a biblical balance by avoiding the extremes of legalism on the one hand, and liberalism on the other. We must not slip or fall by compromising our commitment to Christ, nor injure young Christians because of our complacency.

Upon reaching the front door, your freezing hands will fumble with the key, sometimes dropping it in an attempt to unlock the door quickly. So too, if as believers, we fumble when facing temptations and tribulations, we speedily ask His forgiveness, get up and press on to maintain our testimony.

The burning sensation returns as you walk around inside the ministry center, trying to warm your feet on the carpet. You may

not want to make the return Snow Run, but you have to. In the same way, once you give your life to Christ and your heart is warmed by His love, you must go out into an oftentimes cold world and share His love and truth with those who may not always want to hear.

Finally, each step of the Snow Run takes you closer to your destination and the reward of warmth and comfort. Likewise, each day brings us as believers, closer to our eternal destiny and an everlasting reward.

Since selling the former ministry center, I have modified the Snow Run—making it a little longer and more challenging. Now the goal is to run all the way to the monkey bars in the obstacle course, do a few pull-ups (if possible) then run back to the house with no halfway point to warm our feet! You sprint back to the house as fast as you can to alleviate the intense burning sensation and numbness of your feet; your lungs, straining for every breath, are also burning! At times, spiritual warfare in a believer's life is so intense that we can feel the fiery darts of the enemy; only the shield of faith will protect us and the Word of God is our source of victory.

Perhaps you will remember this story of the Snow Run as you see the Day of the Lord approach or your time draws near to go to Him. May you be a conqueror who runs your race for the Lord with perseverance, leaping over every obstacle that hinders, remaining faithful to the very end and joyfully entering His eternal kingdom!

My summer challenge is to run to the obstacle course, barefoot, through the hundreds of clover flowers populating our lawn—carefully avoiding bees collecting their nectar—and dodging "land mines" (animal poop). This puts me in mind of the challenge and adventure of living for Jesus Christ every day of my life! There may be unpleasant times, but in the end, we win—which makes all we go through for our Lord Jesus Christ well worth it!

Passing the Torch of Determination

I have sought to instill biblical determination in my children (and now my grandchildren). My son, BJ, started playing soccer at age 6.

He did not like to practice, nor did he see the importance of it. All he wanted was the excitement and challenge of the game and scoring goals. I knew if he was going to be good and achieve his potential he had to train.

I made him practice every type of kick imaginable using both feet. I made him run laps and do various drills I would invent. I made him practice soccer in all kinds of weather. Above all I sought to teach him the importance of honoring the Lord and having a good attitude. BJ became so motivated and dedicated that he would train two to three hours on his own almost every day—even in rain, mud and snow.

The fruit of his labor paid off. By age 14, he had excelled in ability and was going to Europe with Team USA. Five days before he was to leave for Europe, he broke his ankle trying out for the Keystone State Games—which he made. After recovering from ankle surgery, he trained harder than ever, and as a result went to Europe the following year with the East-West Soccer Ambassadors. He was made team captain and scored the most goals for the U.S. team.

The summer before his senior year of high school, BJ tore the anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) and did other damage to his right knee. After extensive rehabilitation, he came back to play for his team, but after reinjuring his knee in another game, he had to have reconstructive surgery and was out for the season. A soccer coach from a rival team wrote in our local paper concerning him: "BJ Rudge has the magic touch with a soccer ball that I have never seen before around Mercer County."

In spite of physical setbacks, he came back to qualify for a scholarship to Geneva College. They won the national championship his freshman year. A week before the championship game, he completely tore the ACL in his other knee. Following yet another surgery, he endured extensive rehabilitation and again came back. At the age of 18, while still a freshman in college, he laid down his soccer spikes and became a high school assistant soccer coach. At age 19, he became one of the youngest head soccer coaches in the country for a public high school.

Over the years, BJ faced many obstacles and injuries. He always persevered, and as a result won many honors and awards for his soccer skills—plus trained and coached many others as well. BJ's testimony is documented in a book entitled *Faith Through the Fire*.

During track season, my daughter Tabitha was team captain her senior year of high school and improving each week. By the end of the season, she was running times that seemed impossible for her just weeks before. Her determination and intensive training was motivated by three goals she developed for districts: break the school record in the open 800 meter, qualify for State, and place at least third to receive a plaque.

All season long I had been encouraging her before the race with Isaiah 40:31 (NKJV):

> "Those who wait on the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint".

She was fantastic in the 800-meter relay at districts, and we were confident she would do well in the open 800. But it was not to be. She ran the 800, just missing the school record by a fraction of a second. She missed qualifying for State competition by two seconds, and she took fourth place, so she did not receive a plaque.

Tabitha was crushed. To make matters worse, the following day there was a big picture in the local paper's sports section of the 800-finish line. All season when Tabitha was winning, or at least placing, the pictures were of other track events, but this first picture of the 800 meter had a great close-up of the finish line and showed only the first three place winners.

Tabitha had honored the Lord all season, and she could not understand why the Lord brought her so far and then let her fall short of her goal. I said to Tabitha, "First, we have to get a proper perspective on this. Do not focus on missing the State meet but focus on the fact that you are number four in the district which is

quite an accomplishment." Then I told her, "Honor the Lord in this valley, and there will be a mountaintop coming up soon."

The next night Tabitha sang with the community choir at a large church in the area. I was way in the back and Tabitha was up front on the platform singing, but we simultaneously looked at each other as they sang one of their new songs, "They That Wait Upon the Lord." The founder of this interracial and highly successful choir selected Tabitha and a young man to help him take the offering. Before he did—and unknown to Tabitha—he spent several minutes sharing how Tabitha was instrumental in getting this tremendous choir started; that she had really "lived the life" and influenced many to come to Christ. Not in the way we had expected, God had honored her for honoring Him. While track is very important to Tabitha, her walk with the Lord is even more important.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 9:24-25:

> Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.

At Geneva College, Tabitha faced additional obstacles, injuries and sickness, but she persevered. She set two indoor track records —one her freshman year and one her senior year. She also placed 33rd at nationals (NCCAA) in cross country during her senior year at Geneva (although she had never run cross country before) and helped her team place fourth at nationals. Also, in her senior year, Tabitha placed fourth in the open 400 at NCCAA. Her 1600-meter relay team, which was undefeated in district, placed second at nationals. And her college women's team took second at nationals. The Lord has honored and blessed her in many other ways for her faithfulness to Him. Years later her daughter qualified twice for the State competition Tabitha had missed by two seconds.

Paying the Price

In 1986, I started coaching my son's YMCA soccer team, the Strikers. We lost the first game to the Flash, an excellent team. So I gave the Strikers a choice. "Give up and just have fun, or if you are willing to pay the price, I will train you hard, and we will go for it." They agreed to go for it, so I trained them hard. We developed an extensive training program and obstacle course at the ministry center, scrimmaging older and better teams, showing special training and motivational videos and so on. We used Philippians 4:13, "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me" as our theme.

We won the rest of our games that year and also won the championship game. During the four years I coached we never lost another game, and our teams won both the league and playoff championships. Pay the price and the results will follow.

The last year I coached youth soccer, I designed a 15-station obstacle course. They had to dribble around cones, pass under a net, head the ball over a volleyball net, shoot on goal, chip over a picnic table, pass through two wooden horses, take five speed shots against the back of our building, dribble around more cones, run tires, cross monkey bars, chip over another picnic table, shoot on another goal, chip through a suspended inner tube, jump over a heavy bag and do ten rebound kicks against an inverted trampoline. Not only did it develop determination and endurance, but greatly helped them develop key soccer skills.

You Can Do It

At the end of regulation play for our championship game during my fourth year of coaching, we were tied 1-1. I wanted to play it out so we could win or lose as a team, but the other team's coach said, "No, we can beat you in a shootout." So I said, "Let's go for it." I got my team together and said we needed to pray for wisdom. I prayed and then I picked five shooters and the other team picked five shooters. We ended up with a tie again. I said to the other

coach, “Let’s play it out,” but he said, “No, we can beat you in a shootout,” so I said, “Let’s go for it again.”

I got the team together again and said, “We need to pray again for wisdom.” I chose five more players. The Lord impressed on my heart to choose one of my worst players. I only played him a few minutes during the whole championship game. My assistant coaches and the players looked at me as if to say, “You are crazy, coach!”

When the other team saw who I chose and was up to shoot, they started laughing and saying, “He is nothing, he can’t do it!” Right before he shot, I went up and hit him on the shoulder and said, “You can do it!” He blasted that ball as hard as he could and it went right over the goalie and into the net, scoring the winning goal. We won the championship.

Do not ever tell me you cannot do it. I am the wrong person to say that to! If I could achieve all I have with no real potential, how much more for those of you who have been blessed with talents and abilities?

Endurance and Perseverance

During my senior year at Bible college, I worked as an area manager for United Companies, an insurance and financial investment corporation. I was out on an appointment with Oscar, a new man I was training. It was his first opportunity to give the total sales presentation himself, and he was determined to make the sale. Somewhat nervously, and in a monotone voice, he shared his presentation for about five minutes when the client’s small dog ran over and started biting his hand and pulling on his shirt sleeve. Oscar did not want to lose his train of thought and momentum, so he kept right on talking, ignoring what was happening. A few minutes later the dog circled the room and came back and started to bite and pull at his pant leg, but again Oscar ignored it and kept right on talking. The dog’s owner, probably hoping we would hurry and finish, did nothing. Then the dog circled the room again and jumped on Oscar’s leg.

Oscar, being so determined to make the sale, did not chase it away. After we were done and outside the house, Oscar hurriedly took off his boot, turned it over, and dumped out yellow liquid. The dog, when it was on his leg, had peed in his boot, but Oscar kept quiet in hopes of making the sale. If Oscar had this much determination just to make a sale (that we did not even make), how much more should we as believers in Christ be determined in our commitment to serve our Lord?

My First and Last Race

Many years ago, Karen and I were with another couple at a recreation area. There was a night race and the three of them were running in it. The husband kept asking me to run too, but I had never run in a race. Finally I accepted his challenge, since I am willing to try almost anything once. All the runners were dressed in shorts, T-shirts and tennis shoes. I was getting interesting stares since I was wearing street clothes and shoes. Jokingly I commented to the couple and to Karen (loud enough so that the other runners could hear) that I was listed in *Runner's World* (a magazine name I thought I made up—but discovered it was the actual name of the premiere running magazine). I wondered why the other runners stared at me even more curiously. I positioned myself near the front of the line thinking I needed all the advantage I could get—not realizing the best runners are supposed to take that spot.

It was a 5k (3.1 mile) race. We were to run halfway around the lake, and then return the same way. I was involved in various forms of exercise, but running was not my forte because of injuries such as a shattered ankle from the roller skating accident, and because I thought running was boring—I liked exciting adventures requiring short bursts of energy. I had never run more than a mile before so this was going to be a great challenge.

Not to get trampled at the start of the race, my strategy was to get out fast with the pack. I stayed with them the first 100 yards and then quickly moved to the side of the road to continue at a much slower pace. During the race I wanted to stop many times,

but I kept going—refusing to walk. I kept hoping to see the leading runners returning—at least knowing the halfway mark was not too far away.

It seemed like an eternity before the first runners began to pass me heading in the opposite direction. Finally, I made it to the halfway mark and thought, "I have made it this far, I can make it the rest of the way." The friend we were with was still heading for the halfway mark when I passed her on the way back. She asked if I wanted to walk and I said, "No way!" My ankle and knees were now hurting, but I decided I was going to complete this race no matter what. As I ran, I reviewed in my mind Ten Things the Lord Taught Me from my Fasting Prayer List, which helped greatly.

Finally, I heard cheering and soon saw the lights by the finish area. The finish line was not far ahead. I completed the race and was told my time was very good for someone who had never run before. Although half of the people beat me, I did manage to come in ahead of the other half—including Karen and our friend's wife. I paid the price for completing the race: the next three days my legs and feet ached, but knowing that I would probably never run in a race again, and having gained much respect for runners (especially my wife and daughter who have run in many more races, including a half-marathon—13.1 miles, and my daughter ran several marathons), I was glad I had accomplished this goal.

The Apostle Paul likens our walk with the Lord as a race. In the same way an athlete must have determination to face and overcome obstacles and difficulties, so must we in living for the Lord. In Acts 20:24 Paul says:

> I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me —the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.

In Galatians 5:7 (NASB), Paul asks:

> You were running well; who hindered you from obeying the truth?

In 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 (NASB), Paul said:

> "Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified".

Hebrews 12:1 admonishes:

> Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

Karen

My wife Karen has a different kind of determination—maybe even stronger in some ways than mine. She has persevered through multiple surgeries and life threatening diseases and has had enduring intense pain throughout her body for several years. Karen has overcome liver disease, a benign ovarian tumor, cancer, lumpectomy, two knee replacements, an additional procedure to rebend the knee, extensive foot and ankle surgery, neuropathy and recurrent cancer (she was given less than five years to live back in 2004)—all while continuing to work selflessly and sacrificially behind the scenes to help me and this ministry.

Since marrying me at age 17, Karen has followed me virtually everywhere I have gone: Bible College in Ohio, Youth Pastor in North Carolina, back to Pennsylvania, hundreds of trips across the country and around the world (except for a few of the extremely dangerous mission trips). I called her my "tag-a-long" because she tried to keep up with me, and I think this is what wore her out. She

has worked side by side with me in the daily operations of this ministry since we started it over 40 years ago. For Karen's many services to this ministry, she received little or no pay, but her rewards will be great in Heaven. She has been a committed and determined follower of Jesus Christ and a true helpmate who has been instrumental in making this ministry so effective.

If it were not for Karen coming to Christ first, I do not know where I would be—perhaps I do know but don't like to think about it! Her coming to Christ eventually influenced me, then both of our families and extended families, and countless more people throughout this area, across the nation and even around the world: All from her decision at the age of 17 to give her life to Christ and then to marry me—and persevering through our many difficult times!

The Heart of a Coach

The following was initially printed in Janor Bestwick's newsletter for the Fellowship of Christian Athletes and is used here by permission:

> Many of you have read BJ Rudge's testimony in the *Faith Through the Fire* book. Now you can read about The Heart of a Coach in the following article.
>
> **BJ's Comments On Perseverance**
>
> Dictionary definition: "To continue in some effort in spite of difficulty; to be steadfast in purpose."
>
> My definition: An unrelenting drive and desire to overcome any obstacle or challenge in the pursuit of achieving a particular goal.
>
> My favorite biblical passage that deals with perseverance: "Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us" (Philippians 3:13b-14, NLT).

Why I chose this passage: It reminds the believer, that just as a runner in a race, he must be persistent and steadfast in pursuing the goal of Christlikeness.

Application of this attribute in my life: While playing soccer as a youth, I came to understand the importance of perseverance. After three soccer related injuries, all of which required surgery and extensive rehabilitation, I had to overcome many obstacles in order to play soccer again. Through these challenges, God not only taught me the importance of never giving up, but also taught me always to keep my focus on Him.

How I apply this to my coaching: At the beginning of the season, I have my players write down specific goals that they want to accomplish. Then, when the team faces obstacles and difficulties during the season, I remind them of these goals. I do this to motivate them and help them recognize that they will only attain their future goals if they are willing to persevere through their present challenges.

In BJ's words: "Success does not mean that you always achieve your goals, but that you give your best effort to attain those goals. Success is not what you do, but who you are."

Eleven Grandchildren

We are all on a journey through life during which God allows and uses various circumstances to mold us to fulfill His plans and purposes. I have repeatedly watched as the Lord worked through difficult times in my eleven grandchildren's lives to accomplish a greater purpose—unrecognized at the time—just as He did in the lives of biblical personalities such as Joseph, Moses, David, Daniel, Ruth, Esther, Paul and others.

My grandchildren have faced many obstacles, challenges and adversities but they have learned to persevere through them because of the example of their parents and grandparents. They

have endured various injuries such as a torn ACL and reconstructive surgery from playing soccer, a broken arm playing football, broken collar bones from falls, extensive clavicle surgery from being tripped, concussions resulting in constant headaches and blurred vision from being hit in the head with a soccer ball, just to name a few.

Like her father BJ, my second oldest granddaughter had great athletic potential, but an injury disclosed a genetic foot and ankle problem. She has had seven extensive ankle surgeries in an attempt to alleviate the constant pain. Through all her pain and suffering her relationship with Christ has grown as her young life has excelled as a testimony of faith and perseverance.

As well as sports, some of my grandchildren are into music, acting or other pursuits. But one of the main attributes they all have is determination. I occasionally remind them when facing difficulties that you are a Christian and you have Rudge blood in you, therefore, always have determination and strive for excellence. Remember, anything you want to be successful at requires practice and perseverance.

Against Five Soccer Players

When my oldest grandson was five, he was playing a three-on-three game of soccer on a beautiful Saturday morning in a youth soccer league with five and six-year-olds. He scored over 10 goals so the director repeatedly stopped the game and advised the defense on how to stop him—but to no avail. He then rearranged the teams and put my grandson with a little boy and girl. The other team had three kids bigger than him, but he kept scoring goals one after the other. In desperation the director put all five players against him and told them not to let him score. As my grandson lined up against them he said, "I can do it. I'm not afraid." He quickly took the ball through and around all five of them and scored.

The point of this illustration is the attitude of a five-year-old that had little training in soccer. We were hoping he would be another BJ

—but without the injuries. He went on to excel in soccer, playing for two national traveling teams. However, he gave up a Division 1 scholarship to play soccer at college to enlist in the Navy to try out for Special Forces. His determination and never-quit attitude was honed through the many difficulties and hard training he experienced in soccer and his self-imposed intense workout routines helped prepare him for the severe and extremely rigorous training at Special Forces.

During the prestigious graduation ceremony in Coronado, the commander mentioned that my grandson gave up a college scholarship to play soccer. He then enthusiastically said to him, "Welcome to the pros!"

Determination of a SWCC and Navy SEAL

My oldest grandson enlisted in the Navy at age 18 with a goal and a dream to become a SWCC (Special Warfare Combatant Crewman). During Navy SWCC Selection after many were either sent home or quit, a SWCC instructor asked him, "Are you going to quit?" "They will have to kill me" he replied. "I have given up too much (family, turned down college scholarship to play soccer ...) and beat up my body too much to quit now." What he endured was horrific and did almost kill him—but he refused to give up and by age 19 he achieved his goal of Naval Special Operations Forces.

In the midst of his rigorous training (crawling through broken seashells and then with open wounds crawling through fresh sewage and repeatedly enduring freezing cold water) my brother Ken gave an insightful quote: "If you want to be the best, you have to face the worst." The additional challenges he has faced for remaining faithful to Christ has been almost incomprehensible, but so far, with God's help, he has overcome.

I have had the opportunity to speak several times at an Arab Center in California to people who have known suffering and persecution firsthand. The group consists of men, women and young people from various countries throughout the Middle East (some are Arabic instructors at the Defense Language Institute at

the Presidio of Monterey in California) and U.S. military personnel. It is an incredible place to speak because there is also a meeting of Jewish believers going on at the same time in the same building. People from both groups ask, "Where else can Arabs and Jews get along so lovingly?" However, the point I want to emphasize concerns a Navy SEAL.

Following my message, many waited to talk to me, to ask questions or obtain free copies of my books. One young man was halfway through his training to become a Navy SEAL (that along with SWCC is probably the most difficult and rigorous military training available). He asked me to pray for him. After doing so I looked him in the eyes and asked, "Are you going to complete the training to become a SEAL?" He responded without hesitation as he looked me in the eyes with confidence, "Sir, they will have to break every bone in my body before I will quit!"

The attitudes of determination and resolve modeled by both these young men are needed by all believers in our commitment and service to Jesus Christ!

Ultimate R.I.O.T.

I used to coordinate an event called the Ultimate R.I.O.T. (Ridiculous, Interesting, Outstanding and Terrific), a high intensity, fast-paced competition which involved hundreds of young people divided into four different teams. Many said it was the most exciting competition they had ever experienced. During the Ultimate R.I.O.T., youth participated in challenging contests including obstacle course, chariot race, cart push, refrigerator box relay, giant pushball, tug of war, indoor snowball fight (stacks of newspapers rolled up into paper snowballs).

After the competition which occurred in gymnasiums, and before awarding trophies, I would evaluate the participants collectively whether they competed like Wimps, Whiners or Winners! I would explain that a wimp is someone who gives up easily; a whiner is someone who complains, blames others or has a bad attitude; and

a winner is someone who does not give up and has a good attitude —no matter what.

Usually all the young people competed like winners. So when I shared my testimony at the end and spoke on peer pressure, I also encouraged them to live for the Lord the same way they competed in the Ultimate R.I.O.T.; with all their heart—like winners who have determined never to give up.

Never Quit; Never Give Up

Bigger guys used to always want to fight me. So I would say to them: "You want to fight me? That's fine. You knock me down? I will get back up. You knock me out? When I come to I am coming after you. You break my arm? I will use the other arm. You break my leg? I will crawl after you. I will not give up. I will keep coming until I get you!" Most of them did not want to fight after that. I strive to live by a similar determination in my commitment to Christ.

One of the most important exhortations regarding the end times —repeated several times in Revelation and elsewhere—is to persevere: be faithful even to the point of death, hold on till the end, have patient endurance, be victorious, overcome, stand firm, endure to the end and do not shrink back. (See Revelation 2:10, 25-26; 13:10; 14:12; 21:7; Matthew 10:22; 24:13; Luke 21:16-19; James 5:8; Hebrews 10:37-39.)

After speaking at Petra Cafe in Fort Stewart a young soldier said to me: "I want to go home, sir." It was understandable for him to be homesick and want to quit the Army, but giving up should not be an option for a believer, nor even be in a Christian's vocabulary.

My desire is to turn the hearts of the people back to the Lord and to inspire them to walk in faithfulness until He returns. As believers in Christ, we must have the attitude that no opposition or obstacle will cause us to give up in defeat. Instead, we must endure to the end in our commitment to Him. We must persevere, remain faithful and never give up until the Lord fulfills what He leads us to do or He gives us clear, new direction.

The Apostle Paul was in prison at Rome, knowing that his time on earth was about to end. Yet with faith and determination he wrote these powerful words in 2 Timothy 4:6-8:

> For I am already being poured out like a drink offering [he was about to be martyred], and the time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for His appearing.

Paul's commitment to Christ resulted in unwavering faith and determination—even to his death. Ask God to instill in you the kind of determination Paul had: to never give up and to remain faithful to the very end.

Not by Might

Even before I gave my life to Christ, I possessed determination. When I wanted to achieve something, I would not quit until I dropped. When I was *not* motivated, I would get bored quickly and give up. That is why I quit job after job and relationship after relationship. As a teen I wasn't motivated to do very much except lift weights, practice karate and have a good time.

After hitchhiking across the country at the age of 18, searching for answers to life, I had an encounter with the resurrected Christ. I found the answers to life and eternity in Jesus Christ. He gave me purpose, meaning and hope. He was Someone to whom I could totally and completely dedicate my life. He has increased and redirected my determination and kept me motivated all these years. Christ has accomplished through me what others thought was not possible.

"'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the LORD Almighty" (Zechariah 4:6). God has taken that little bit of determination in my youth; has redirected and increased it, and enabled me by His power to do what was seemingly not doable. In

upcoming books on *The Impossible* and *Adventures in Missions*, I document some of the many difficult situations the Lord has enabled me to overcome through unwavering faith in Him, obedient determination and persistent perseverance.

Determination means refusing to give up no matter how daunting the obstacle, how intense the opposition, how rough the road, or how difficult the battle, but to persevere until the very end and victory is achieved. Never forget, if you consistently, persistently, incessantly and unrelentingly believe and never give up, you will accomplish what others thought to be impossible!

Hidden and Pet Sins

Many Christians hold on to what I call hidden and pet sins—seemingly concealed from others and supposedly overlooked by God, or "favorite" sins they do not want to give up. As a young Christian I tolerated attitudes and behavior which I thought were innocent and therefore acceptable to God. However, as I grew in my relationship with Christ I knew that the Holy Spirit desired to clean out these "sins" so I stopped justifying them.

Actually, there is no such thing as a secret sin. God sees and knows everything. The psalmist said: "You have set our iniquities before You, our secret sins in the light of Your presence" (Psalm 90:8). Jeremiah the prophet wrote: "'Can anyone hide in secret places so that I cannot see him?' declares the LORD. 'Do not I fill heaven and earth?' declares the LORD'" (Jeremiah 23:24). The Apostle Paul admonishes: "Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible" (Ephesians 5:11-13).

Big Deal!

Many Christians speak words and participate in activities that dishonor the Lord, but they have done them for so long that the initial conviction of God's Spirit has dulled. They have become desensitized and no longer feel remorse or guilt. They rationalize why it is not that bad and condone their actions with the excuse that probably everybody—even Christian leaders—are doing them. As a result, they hinder God's Spirit to free them through His Word.

Perhaps the Holy Spirit and your conscience once convicted you about certain sins, but you made excuses and persisted in your attitudes and behaviors. While God's Spirit does not condemn but

convicts, the Spirit can be grieved from willful, unrepentant sin and will eventually cease from convicting you. Do not falsely conclude that your hidden or pet sins are no big deal. They are a big deal and need to be overcome.

Dr. Adrian Rogers insightfully stated, "Sin will take you farther than you want to go, keep you longer than you want to stay, and cost you more than you want to pay."

If you mistakenly turn your shower water to freezing cold, it will be a tremendous shock to your system and you will immediately jump back. But if you gradually turn the water cooler and cooler, your body begins to adapt and you hardly notice the transition. So too, many people who fall away from the Lord gradually become lukewarm and complacent, then cold and calloused without realizing it. Eventually they condone a lifestyle that contradicts their profession of faith or they completely forsake their *First Love*.

If you are to live a disciplined and godly life then you must no longer tolerate the persistent sin within that is exposed in God's Word and by His Spirit. Second Corinthians 7:1 encourages believers to "purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit."

David entreats the Lord:

> Forgive my hidden faults. Keep your servant also from willful sins; may they not rule over me. Then I will be blameless, innocent of great transgression. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer" (Psalm 19:12-14).

We should never become complacent or tolerant of willful sin in our lives. Instead, we should diligently seek to be set free by walking God's path to triumph—transformed by His Spirit and Word to live victoriously as champions in a great contest!

Hiding His Face

If you persist in allowing hidden and pet sins in your life, then the Lord may hide His face from you.

Isaiah 59:1-2 says:

> Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save, nor His ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear.

Ezekiel 39:23-24 states:

> And the nations will know that the people of Israel went into exile for their sin, because they were unfaithful to Me. So I hid My face from them and handed them over to their enemies, and they all fell by the sword. I dealt with them according to their uncleanness and their offenses, and I hid My face from them.

Micah 3:4 (NASB) declares:

> Then they will cry out to the LORD, but He will not answer them. Instead, He will hide His face from them at that time because they have practiced evil deeds.

Psalm 24:3-5 asks and answers crucial questions:

> Who may ascend the mountain of the LORD? Who may stand in His holy place? The one who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not trust in an idol or swear by a false god. They will receive blessing from the LORD and vindication from God their Savior.

Psalm 66:18-20 promises:

> If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened; but God has surely listened and has heard my

> prayer. Praise be to God, who has not rejected my prayer or withheld His love from me!

Rooting Them Out

"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline" (Proverbs 1:7). "To fear the LORD is to hate evil" (Proverbs 8:13). We must let God expose and eradicate hidden and pet sins. As David said in Psalm 32:1-5:

> Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the LORD does not count against them and in whose spirit is no deceit. When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy on me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to You and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD." And You forgave the guilt of my sin (Psalm 32:1-5).

Psalm 51 contains David's contrite prayer for pardon after Nathan the prophet confronted him concerning his illicit affair with Bathsheba. Tim Moore writes in the February 2022 *Lamplighter*, David "had witnessed Saul descend into mental anguish and confusion when the Spirit of the Lord departed from him. He was desperate to stay close to the Almighty—and understood that his own sin had threatened that relationship."

Although David had sinned grievously, he knew God would forgive so he cried out with a broken spirit:

> Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from Your presence or take Your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me (Psalm 51:10-12).

Five P's

During a time of fasting, I recognized and recorded the Five P's of why many people compromise or abandon their relationship with Christ:

1. Pleasure—Being compromised in sexual immorality or pursuing the temporary enjoyment of worldliness.
2. Popularity—Becoming people pleasers more than God fearers and caring more about other's opinions than God's.
3. Power—Wanting to control and impress others.
4. Pride—Striving for positions of high standing and prestige.
5. Prosperity—Desiring material wealth more than God's favor.

The Lord had previously given me another set of Five P's. He taught me that when we become rebellious, or allow willful, hidden sin in our lives, we lose the following Five P's:

1. Protection—The wall of protection around believers comes down when we involve ourselves in willful sin and rebellion.
2. Provision—God's hand of blessing is removed.
3. Peace—When we are not in right relationship with the Lord, we lose inner calmness and no longer walk in His peace.
4. Presence—There is nothing worse than losing the sense of God's presence in our lives.
5. Power—We wonder why our prayers are not answered, why we do not have discernment, why we seem powerless and ineffective and why the end result is not victory.

God wants all five of these "P's" in our lives, but to have them we must repent of repetitive, willful and hidden sins and make Him Lord over every area of our lives. We must not tolerate and justify secret sins, saying, "Well, you know, I cannot be perfect. Everyone has problems. So, I am going to hold on to my jealousy, my gossiping, my gluttony, my greed, my arrogance, my lust.... I am going to continue in this relationship or practice even though it is

contrary to Your Word.... I am going to keep looking at pornography and continue in immoral relationships.... I am going to keep watching immoral or occult movies.... I am going to keep doing this or that... but I still love You Lord, and I still want to serve You."

John Blanchard stated: "No man can prove that he is a child of God without showing the family likeness." It is true that I have led people to Christ who did not have a chance to grow in their relationship with Christ. Either their life ended shortly thereafter, or due to circumstances, they were unable to mature spiritually. However, God's desire is that His children reflect His character. This is one reason why Ephesians 5:1 tells us to be imitators of God, and why Romans 8:29 indicates that we are to be conformed to the likeness of Jesus Christ.

God wants to clean up our lives. When we allow Him to root out the hidden and pet sins in our lives these Five P's will be restored:

1. Protection—As God has protected my life on numerous occasions, I have assurance He will continue to do so until His purpose is fulfilled. Therefore, I can stand up with the courage of Elijah and take on the prophets of Baal and not be afraid because God will protect me. Even if I lose my life, I am eternally sheltered from the second death and ushered into His presence.
2. Provision—He will not give you everything you want, but He will give you everything you need. As your selfish desires are replaced by delighting yourself in Him, He will give you the desires of your heart.
3. Peace—This does not mean you will not face difficulties. I am talking about living a lifestyle that, regardless of your problems, God gives you an inner peace. Even though everything around you is chaotic, you can handle difficult circumstances because you know you are in right relationship with the Lord. He has everything under control and is working it all together for good.

4. Presence—While the worst feeling you can have is losing the sense of His presence, the best feeling is walking in His presence.
5. Power—I want to have God's genuine power in this age of imitation, counterfeits and compromise—power to resist temptation, power to love my enemies and power to pray for those who persecute me. I want to see the hearts of the people turn to the Lord as His Spirit brings deep conviction on them. I want to see God do mighty works and miracles through my life as I accurately and boldly proclaim His Word. I want to see His power manifest as He stretches forth His hand to heal and performs miraculous signs and wonders (Acts 4:30).

So, clean out the hidden and pet sins in your life that hinder your walk with Christ. Purity of heart and life are essential to experiencing the Five P's of the Lord: peace, provision, protection, presence and power!

Desire the Lord

Three Levels of Christian Life

There are three levels of commitment that most Christians go through. First is the *Feelings* level (shared in the chapter on Total Commitment). We must grow beyond living by mere feelings and experiences. It is fine to see a little baby running around in diapers, but for a teen or adult who does not have a medical problem to be wearing diapers would be ridiculous. So too, it is okay if you are a new Christian, but if you have been walking with the Lord for several years, it is unnatural and unhealthy to run around in the spiritual diapers of feelings and experiences. It is time to grow up.

Second is the *Commitment* level. This is where we live by obedience and commitment, regardless of how we feel. It is where we do what God's Word says, what His Spirit directs—whether we want to or not.

Thinking of commitment as the ultimate level, I lived that way for many years. However, the Lord showed me there is another dimension He has for us—what I call the *Desire* level; but before I tell you what it is let me explain how I came to it.

While in Phoenix in the summer of 1988, I was reflecting on my relationship with the Lord and everything that had been happening: the Middle East where my family and I were caught in a potential hijacking and hostage situation and all the trauma associated with it; the death of my father from a heart attack; my wife diagnosed with a life-threatening tumor; the Oregon wreck in which our car was totaled in a four-vehicle collision; the tire blowout and frightening near-accident with the next rental car I was driving through Arizona. I reflected on these and other related incidences (I later wrote about in *Strength through Weakness* booklet) and asked the Lord why they were happening. He impressed on my

heart these three levels of commitment, especially the third and ultimate dimension of our Christian life—the *Desire* level.

You should know that as you enter the Desire level, the things and attractions of this world will dim in comparison to knowing the Lord. You could find yourself despising things you once loved and loving that which you once disdained!

The Desire Level

The *Desire* level is where we have a passion, hunger and thirst for the Lord more than anything else on earth. My relationship with Jesus Christ is more important to me and fulfills and satisfies me more than anyone or anything else—more than wealth, power, sex or any other temporary pleasure this world has to offer. All else is inferior to knowing Christ. I never want to lose His presence. I understand what the psalmist meant when he said, "Earth has nothing I desire besides You" (Psalm 73:25) and "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for You, my God" (Psalm 42:1).

The Lord is saying to you, "I have a deeper dimension for you. I have something that will satisfy you more than anything else you are seeking." David said, "You have put more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and wine abound" (Psalm 4:7, ESV).

Think about this! The greatest feeling in the world does not come from alcohol or drugs, from pornography or sex, from pleasure-oriented indulgences or from anything else the world is offering. I have tried just about everything imaginable, and I can assure you, the greatest feeling in the world comes from knowing everything is right between you and the Lord, desiring Him more than anyone else and wanting His will more than anything else. He is the ultimate fulfillment of all you need and wish! This is the Desire Level God wants to bring you to.

> Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on His

> law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers (Psalm 1:1-3).

Besides not wanting to be laughed at, a retired Marine confessed he had one other problem that kept him from accepting Christ. There were certain things he did not want to give up—mainly women. He asked me, "How could you at such a young age of 18 give up your sexual immorality, gambling, fighting and alcohol? Wasn't that fun?" "Yes, it was fun," I responded, "but I found something far more fulfilling. Besides, I am willing to sacrifice anything in this life to obtain that for which Christ has called me and to inherit what God has for me in the next life." I continued, "If you really believe that God exists, then you should pursue Him with the same passion you pursue your fleeting pleasures. The Lord will put more joy and hope in your heart than any imaginable experience or than any other person.

Jesus encourages us to replace temporal pursuits with goals of far greater importance:

> Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well (Matthew 6:33).

The psalmist said it this way:

> Delight yourself in the LORD and He will give you the desires of your heart (Psalm 37:4).

The Lord has taught me that I cannot coerce or manipulate Him into giving me what I want. However, if I delight myself in Him, seek to Honor His name and walk in obedience, He will grant the desires of my heart (because they will be His desires as well) and will abundantly bless beyond what I could ever ask or think.

During my times of fasting, I often pray:

> Lord, do not let me attempt to manipulate You into what I want or think You should be, but reveal Yourself to me as You are. I want to know You. Make known to me who You are by Your Word and by Your Spirit. Cause me to submit and be conformed to who You are and what You require of me.

When you "love the LORD your God with all your heart [inner most being and desires] and with all your soul [volition and will] and with all your mind [brain and intellect] and with all your strength [physical body]" (Mark 12:30), you remove anything that takes you away from Him. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* states concerning this verse:

> God is to be loved completely and totally because He alone is God and because He has made a covenant of love with His people. In the covenant God gives Himself totally in love to His people; therefore He expects His people to give themselves totally in love to Him.

Instead of pursuing a self-indulgent lifestyle that eludes fulfillment as does chasing the wind, pursue Jesus Christ through prayer, fasting and study of Scripture. As you do, the temporary pleasures of this world fade in comparison to knowing Christ. You will gain a deeper revelation of Him and His glory by coming to know Him in a more real and intimate way. You will desire His will for your life while longing for His Second Coming when He will rule and reign in righteousness, peace and joy for all eternity!

Take the Challenge

At 18, I dropped to my knees in a large auditorium and committed my life to Jesus Christ. It was the wisest, strongest and most courageous decision I have ever made. That, however, was just the beginning of my walk with Christ and my adventurous journey of growth and change. My personal testimony, *The Taming of Godzilla*, reveals how Jesus Christ transformed my life and how God took a person who was:

- totally committed to weightlifting and karate, and made him totally committed to Jesus Christ
- a victim of peer pressure and gave him the courage to stand alone, even in dangerous situations
- out of control in almost every area of his life, but brought every aspect of his life under His control
- rebellious and stiff-necked, but taught him to be surrendered and sensitive to God's Word and Spirit
- a liar, cheat and thief, but enabled him to live a life of integrity
- proud and arrogant, and taught him to walk in humility and meekness before the Lord
- constantly quitting jobs and switching friends and girlfriends ... and gave him unwavering determination and commitment in ministry and marriage
- centered on self and pleasure (even to the point of believing himself to be *god*) and taught him instead the meaning of self-sacrifice and gave him the desire to know and please his Creator more than anything else
- known as "Godzilla"—one of the hardest hitters in the karate dojo—to being known as one of the hardest-hitting

speakers
- hitchhiking across the country in rebellion against God to traveling throughout the U.S. and around the world proclaiming Him
- a skeptical, smart-mouthed, streetwise kid, and convinced him of His reality; Who has done the impossible through his life and ministry and Who has given him a passion to proclaim the truth and faithfulness of Jesus Christ
- voted least likely to succeed and without potential, to directing a growing international ministry, challenging believers to reach their maximum potential in Christ.

Living for Jesus Christ has been an exciting experience! At times, even though the obstacles have been many and the opposition strong, the blessings have been far greater.

Maybe you are already on the path to reaching your maximum potential in Christ or perhaps you are far removed from what God intended you to be. Today, you have an opportunity to begin, or reinforce, an incredible spiritual journey. Whether you are making an initial commitment to Christ or renewing a previous one, this will be a vital step toward achieving the unique plan and purpose He has for your life.

How Do You Reach Your Maximum Potential?

In summary, how do you reach your maximum potential? Is it by tapping into latent powers within your mind or body? Is it by becoming one with the universe and realizing you are god? Is it through some esoteric technique or ritual? No! It is by having a personal relationship with the resurrected Christ; coming to know Jesus in a real and personal way and living by the truth and principles in His Word.

The Bible is not a record of humans' *quest* for God, but rather God's *revelation* to humanity. Christianity is not merely one of a myriad of *religions*. It is a *relationship* with the Creator and Master

of the Universe. Jesus Christ is not one of many ways to salvation; His death and resurrection provide the only hope of eternal life.

Compiled on the following page are listed the biblical principles God used to transform my life. Although as a teenager, I had violated every one of these on a regular basis, after giving my life to Jesus Christ at 18, I realized the essence of true strength and wisdom. God's Spirit began to transform my life as I implemented these biblical principles.

Jesus really can change the life of one with seemingly little hope or potential. As you read each principle below, contemplate how God would have you apply it to your life; then ask Him by His Spirit to begin transforming you.

The origin of the following lists came about during an outreach to Haiti. I had shared with several missionaries these biblical principles which have molded my life and ministry. They were so touched after my message that they suggested I make them available in poster format so they could be reviewed daily. The missionaries told me these were some of the most powerful truths they had heard and that every believer needed to be reminded of them.

You may want to make copies of the following principles and place them as posters where they can be seen frequently. They will inspire and encourage you to walk in faithfulness with the Lord and honor His Word. Begin this thrilling journey today. May the Lord bless, guide and empower you as you grow in your relationship with Jesus Christ and in reaching the full potential and purpose for which He created you!

Principles for Reaching Your Maximum Potential

The following is an outline of the truths you have read about in this book to assist you in attaining the high calling God has for your life:

- Recognize the Potential You Have—God Does
- Begin the Quest—Examine the Evidence for Faith in Jesus Christ

- Count the Cost of Accepting Christ as Savior and Lord
- Make a Total Commitment to Christ as Lord
- Walk in Obedience to the Lord's Will
- Be Surrendered and Available so God Can Mold Your Life
- Evaluate Your Motives—Pride Ends in Destruction; Humility in Honor
- Live a Life of Integrity Before God and the World
- Establish Balance by Being Physically, Mentally, Emotionally and Spiritually Fit
- Exercise Self-Control—the Essence of Strength
- Dare to Be Different—Don't Compromise or Conform
- Have the Courage to Stand Alone
- Develop Determination to Never Give Up—Remain Faithful to the End
- Root Out Hidden and Pet Sins
- Desire the Lord More than Anything or Anyone Else

These are the biblical principles which have greatly molded my life and ministry. I hope and pray you have been challenged and motivated by them as have many others. Start today to apply each of these truths to your life. Dare to achieve your full potential and the purpose God has for you. Allow Him to do the impossible through your life.

Commitment to Reach My Full Potential in Christ

Reach your maximum potential in Christ by first desiring, and then affirming the following in your heart. After prayerfully pondering each one, consider signing below. Then determine to practice them in your daily life.

- I realize the tremendous potential within me through Your Holy Spirit.
- I want to begin the quest of living for Jesus Christ.
- I have examined the evidence and counted the cost. I choose to commit the rest of my life to You.

- I accept You as my Savior and acknowledge You as Lord over every area and particular of my life.
- Strengthen me to walk in obedience to Your Word and anoint me to fulfill Your purpose.
- Cause me to be available, yielded, submissive, surrendered and sensitive, that Your Spirit may speak to my heart. Lead, guide and empower me to accomplish Your goals, dreams and vision for my life.
- Remind me to daily examine my motives and inspire me to maintain a pure heart with a genuine spirit of humility and meekness.
- Enable me to live a life of integrity before You and this world.
- Motivate me to develop a balanced life and to glorify You with all of my being—physical, mental, emotional and spiritual.
- Encourage me to live a life of discipline and self-control—the true essence of strength.
- Keep me from compromising and conforming; inspire me to dare to be different. Make my life count.
- Grant me the courage to stand alone when necessary.
- Instill within me the determination to never give up and to remain faithful until I go home to be with You.
- Do not let me tolerate hidden and pet sins. Help me, by the power of Your Spirit, to overcome anything that would ensnare or enslave me.
- I desire You, Lord Jesus, more than anyone or anything else on earth.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Many people have accepted this challenge and dared to earnestly apply these biblical principles to their lives. They have shared some amazing accounts of what God has done in and through them. Their changed lives are living testimonies to the power of God's Word and Spirit. I look forward to one day hearing from you

concerning how God's Word and Spirit have transformed your life and conformed you—not to a godless world—but more and more into His likeness (Romans 8:29)!

For More Information

Bill Rudge has produced numerous books, pamphlets and audio messages on a variety of timely topics. For a complete listing or a copy of his informative newsletter, visit www.billrudge.org or write to:

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